Thesis

WASHINGTON IRVING AS A BIOGRAPHER

by

Ethel Crockett Oliver

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Thesis

# WASHINGTON IRVING AS A BIOGRAPHER

by

Ethel Crockett Oliver

(A.B., Bates College, 1935)

submitted in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

1948

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## INTRODUCTION

Washington Irving, America's first internationally known writer, is remembered and enjoyed for his tales and essays. Every American by the time he has finished secondary school has a nodding acquaintance with him, and some are even intimate friends, for the Knickerbocker History with its homely philosophy, its subtle humor, and its leisurely charm remains popular even today. Rip Van Winkle, the henpecked husband, still arouses the amused chuckles and sympathy of modern America. The familiar essays treating of England and America by the gentleman of Tarrytown are still enjoyed by old and young alike, but few people realize that Irving is rightfully one of the foremost biographers of the nineteenth century.

There is a point in the time of every successful man when he will be weighed and measured by another reading generation in the light of other points of view. It is perhaps worthwhile for our biography-conscious age to consider the work of a leading biographer in an era so important to America's literary development. There are the weighty historical lives of his heroes--Washington, Columbus, and the companions of the Admiral; the warm literary biography of Oliver Goldsmith, himself so much like Irving; the sympathetically treated thumbnail sketches of minor characters in major works; and the biographical essays of men and women in the nineteenth century news, some of which were published in Irving's monthly, the Analectic

Magazine. Such an appraisal of Irving, the biographer, need not include the lesser-known Captain Bonneville, since Irving merely helped in editing the work of the captain himself.

A critical look at biography's best-sellers one hundred years ago may show a difference in the literary standards of two ages with the result that one may judge their author on the bases of his ability to portray the truth, to use his materials in a scholarly fashion, and to delineate character sympathetically against a background made familiar. Such a look at Irving's biographies may result in a clarification of our own requirements of biography in a day when that form of writing is quickly becoming an extremely popular choice among modern readers.

## CHAPTER I

## LIFE AND VOYAGES OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

By 1826 Washington Irving had made a name for himself with his essays and tales. The Knickerbocker History had been published and eagerly sought by readers on both sides of the Atlantic. At last Sydney Smith's question, "Who reads an American book?", had been answered by this popular, sympathetic, and extremely modest New York author. However, Irving felt that perhaps the lack of deep seriousness, of studious endeavor in his stories was causing the public to view him as a light, not too intelligent, writer. He felt that to add the stamp of dignity to his already popular works, his own reputation would be more worthwhile and lasting. So, when it was suggested by Alexander Everett, United States Minister at Madrid, that he translate into English the works of Don Martin Fernandez de Navarrete, he eagerly grasped the opportunity. As he wrote in the Preface of his own biography of Columbus:

> Soon after my arrival [at Madrid] , the publication of M. Navarrete made its appearance. I found it to contain many documents, hitherto unknown, which threw additional lights on the discovery of the New World; and which reflected the greatest credit on the industry and activity of the learned editor. Still the whole presented rather a mass of rich materials for history, than a history itself. And invaluable as such stores may be to the laborious inquirer, the sight of disconnected papers and official documents is apt to be repulsive to the general reader, who seeks for clear and continued narrative. These circumstances made me hesitate in my proposed undertaking; yet the subject was of so interesting and national a kind, that I could not

willingly abandon it. . . .[1]

Irving checked the documents, manuscripts, letters, and journals and decided that "a history, faithfully digested from these various materials, was a desideration in literature, and would be a more satisfactory occupation to myself, and a more acceptable work to my country. . . ."[2]

On his arriving at Madrid, Irving was granted great facilities for undertaking the work. He was a guest of the American Consul, O. Rich, one of the best bibliographers in Europe, specializing in documents relative to the early history of America, and having the best collection extant of Spanish colonial history. Mr. Rich put the library at the absolute command of Irving; it was here that the author got his major sources. Both the Royal Library at Madrid and the library of the Jesuits' College of San Isidro were opened to him. Considerable assistance was given by Navarrete himself. Irving was also allowed by the Duke of Veraguas, descendant and representative of Columbus, to inspect the archives of the family.

The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus was published after a delay caused by his anxiety to secure complete accuracy, in 1828, amid the author's feelings that it was doomed to failure. Several editions were published before he was quite satisfied. The work appeared in eighteen

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[1]Washington Irving, Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus (New York: G. P. Putnam and Company, 1853), Vol. I, Preface, p. xiii.

[2] Ibid, p. xiv.

books, starting with the birth and parentage of Columbus, taking him step by step and detail by detail through his wanderings, triumphs, disgraces, and trials to his death. The facts are there; very little has been found to be criticized with regard to authenticity of fact; but some critics feel that the story is much too romantic for a biography. Irving, being Irving, was as much interested in the Spanish Court, the pageantry of the Moorish War, and the Paradise of the New World, as in straight bare facts of history. Therefore, we fortunately have a readable, charming account of the great Admiral. The qualities that made Irving a great character-builder in fiction enabled him to interpret realistically the characteristics of these early explorers and adventurers. The work itself is well illustrated with its maps and charts, copies of originals by Irving, and explanations of historical places. Footnotes in which T. S. Heneken, Esquire, tells what each place in the West Indies is like at the time of publication add interest to the story. Important people who are mentioned are later explained in the appendix, so that there are many pages of short biographical sketches. Suppositions are usually verified or disqualified. In one instance, after checking as completely as possible all information about Columbus and running against a blank wall in regard to his early life, he says the son of Columbus, who could have cleared it, ". . . has left it in obscurity, and has now and then perplexed us with cross lights; perhaps unwilling, from a principle of mistaken pride, to reveal the indigence and obscurity from which his father so gloriously emerged."[3]

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[3] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 29.

It is interesting to note that during his research, Irving found in an old Latin manuscript marginal notations that he proved beyond a doubt to have been written by Columbus himself.

Washington Irving's Journal explains the conflicting feelings he held toward his first long biography. He is on one occasion doubtful of the reception of his work:

> I have lost confidence in the favorable disposition of my countrymen and look forward to cold scrutiny and stern criticism, and this is a line of writing in which I have not hitherto ascertained my own power. Could I afford it, I should like to write, and to lay my writings aside when finished. There is an independent delight in study and in the creative exercise of the pen, we live in a world of dreams, but publication lets in the noisy rabble of the world, and there is an end of our dreaming.[4]

Another excerpt, dated December 30, 1826, states:

> Columbus--go out--return home and write a little, but sleepy and go to bed--and so ends the year 1826, which has been a year of the hardest application and toil of the pen I have ever passed. I feel more satisfied, however, with the manner in which I have passed it than I have been with that of gayer years, and close this year of my life in better humor with myself than I have often done.[5]

In his last notation in the Journal for the year 1828, he says, ". . . The literary success of the History of Columbus has been greater than I anticipated and gives me hopes that I have executed something which may have greater duration than I anticipate for my works of mere imagination."[6] So often an author cannot rightly judge his works. It is today his "works of

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[4] Pierre M. Irving, Life and Letters of Washington Irving (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1862), Vol. II, p. 260.

[5] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 254.

[6] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 363.

mere imagination" not his serious biographies that are of "greater duration".

Irving was severely criticized at one time for not giving sufficient credit to Navarrete for the aid derived from his collections of documents. To vindicate himself, Irving published what Navarrete said of the work. Otherwise, as he said, nothing could have induced him to publish such laudatory remarks. In the introduction of his third volume of Collections of Spanish Voyages, Navarrete cites testimonies of the usefulness of his work to the republic of letters. He writes:

> A signal proof of this is just given us by Mr. Washington Irving in the History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus which he has published with a success as general as it is well merited. We said in our introduction that we did not propose to write the history of the admiral, but to publish notes and materials that it might be written with veracity; and it is fortunate that the first person to profit by them, should be a literary man, judicious and erudite, already known in his own country and in Europe by other works of merit. Resident in Madrid, exempt from the rivalries that have influenced some European natives with respect to Columbus and his discoveries; having an opportunity to examine excellent books and precious manuscripts; to converse with persons instructed in these matters, and having always at hand the authentic documents which we have just published, he had been enabled to give his history that fullness, impartiality and exactness, which make it much superior to those of the writers who preceded him. To this he adds his regular method, and convenient distribution; his style animated, pure and elegant; the notice of various personages who mingled in the concern of Columbus; and in examination of various questions, in which always shine sound criticism, erudition, and good taste.[7]

This praise was especially gratifying to Irving, to a modest Irving who would not have called attention to it unless he had felt it absolutely necessary to clear up a question of ethics.

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[7] Washington Irving, op. cit., Vol. I, Preface, p. xvii.

Irving carried over from his popular tales the ability to portray vividly and humanly the people in his Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus. Columbus's character is done very well; he is treated somewhat romantically, but it takes a romanticist to understand the dreams and visions of a man who had been ignored, insulted, and snubbed for years before he was given a chance to prove his plan. The author himself states that in order to understand the character of Columbus one must know his thoughts, his fancies, his reasons. There must be detailed accounts of the lands he traveled, the seas he sailed. The new wonders must be given ample description in order to know that dreamer, that visionary, Columbus.

In the beginning of his Life, Irving says of his hero:

> He was one of those men of strong, natural genius, who from having to content at their very outset with privations and impediments, acquire an intrepidity in encountering and a facility in vanquishing difficulties, throughout their careers. Such men learn to effect great purposes with small means, supplying their deficiency by the resources of their own energy and invention. This, from his earliest commencement throughout the whole of his life, was one of the remarkable features in the history of Columbus. In every undertaking, the scantiness and apparent insufficiency of his means enhance the grandeur of his achievements.[8]

Without a doubt the admiration and reverence Irving had for the brave Admiral is shown in the treatment of the entire life. Little do we find wrong in the characters of his heroes; if there is something not quite right, Irving seeks excuses. In one instance, he refers to Columbus's allowing slave trading [he also naively praises the queen for her attitude against it] and seeks to justify the fault by saying:

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[8] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 27.

> It is proper to show him in connection with the age in which he lived, lest the error of the times should be considered as his individual faults. It is not the intention of the author, however, to justify Columbus on the point where it is inexcusable to err. Let it remain a blot on his illustrious name, and let others derive a lesson from it.[9]

That "blot" seems to have been somewhat dimmed by the opening statement, as, I believe, Irving intended it to be. He further excuses him in the biography by saying,

> This was an arrangement widely different from his original intention of treating the natives with kindness, as peaceful subjects of the crown. But all his plans had been subverted and his present measures forced upon him by the exigency of the times and the violence of lawless men.[10]

Irving has carefully gathered information about the physical appearance of Columbus from his son, Fernando, from Las Casas, and other contemporaries. According to these accounts,

> He was tall, well-formed, muscular, and of an elevated and dignified demeanor. His visage was long, and neither full nor meagre; his complexion fair and freckled and inclined to be ruddy; his nose aquiline; his cheekbones were rather high; his eyes light gray, and apt to enkindle; his whole countenance had an air of authority. His hair in his youthful days was of a light color, but care and trouble, according to Las Casas, soon turned it gray; at the age of thirty it was quite white. He was moderate and simple in diet and apparel, eloquent in discourse, engaging and affable with strangers, and his amiableness and suavity in domestic life strongly attached his household to his power. His temper was naturally irritable; but he subdued it by the magnanimity of his spirit, comforting himself with a courteous and gentle gravity, and never indulging in any intemperance of language. Throughout his life he was known for strict attention to the offices of religion, observing vigorously the fasts and ceremonies of the church. . .[11]

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[9] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 491.

[10] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 214.

[11] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 41-42.

It is true his sketch of Columbus leans toward the eulogistic; it is visionary; it is not commonplace, but Columbus himself was no ordinary man, and though we may feel that his faults are glossed over, we are still interested in this charming person, for, as Irving said, there is a national interest in the character--Columbus.

In the last chapter of the final book there is a character analysis of the Admiral, completely written with no reference to facts or historical deeds. In this chapter, Irving says:

> In narrating the story of Columbus, it has been the endeavor of the author to place him in a clear and familiar point of view; for this purpose he has rejected no circumstance, however trivial, which appears to evolve some point of character; and he has sought all kinds of collateral facts which might throw light upon his views and motives. With this view also he has detailed many facts hitherto passed over in silence, or vaguely noticed by historians, probably because they might be deemed instances of error or misconduct on the part of Columbus; but he who paints a great man merely in great and heroic traits, though he may produce a fine picture, will never present a faithful portrait. Great men are compounds of great and little qualities. Indeed much of their greatness rises from their mastery over the imperfections of their nature, and their noblest actions are sometimes struck forth by the collision of their merits and their defects. . . .[12]

The last theory shows that Irving doesn't follow completely the early idea of straight eulogistic biography but points to the modern picture of realism. However, the author is not reticent in giving his opinion of the characters that he believes evil, base, or faithless to their trust.

In no uncertain terms he gives his opinion of Ferdinand, making him an exact contrast to his nearly-perfect queen, Isabella. He describes the king with as much detail as he has pictured the physical appearance of

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[12] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 484.

Columbus and continues:

> Such is the picture given of him by the Spanish historians of his time. It has been added, however, that he had more of bigotry than religion; and his ambition was craving rather than magnanimous; that he made war less like a paladin than a prince, less for glory than mere dominion, and that his policy was cold, selfish and artful. He was called the wise and prudent, in Spain; in Italy, the pious; in France and England, the ambitious and perfidious. He certainly was one of the most subtle statesmen, but one of the most thorough egotists, that ever sat upon a throne.[13]

Washington Irving rather indignantly--that is, indignantly for him--refers to the monument erected to Columbus by Ferdinand at Columbus's death. Inscribed on it were the words: "A Castilla y a Leon Nuevo Mundo dio Colon." (To Castile and Leon, Columbus gave a New World.) Irving comments:

> However great a monument may be for a subject to receive; it is certainly but a cheap reward for a sovereign to bestow. As to the motto inscribed upon it, it remains engraved in the memory of mankind, more indelibly than in brass or marble; a record of the great debt of gratitude due to the discoverer, which the monarch so faithlessly neglected to discharge.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Attempts have been made in recent days, by loyal Spanish writers, to vindicate the conduct of Ferdinand towards Columbus. They were doubtless well intended, but they have been futile, nor is their failure to be regretted. To screen such injustice in so eminent a character from the reprobation of mankind, is to deprive history of one of its most important uses. Let the ingratitude of Ferdinand stand recorded in its full extent, and endure throughout all time. The dark shadow which it casts upon his brilliant renown will be a lesson to all rulers, teaching them that it is important to their own fame--their treatment of illustrious men.[14]

Irving has here followed his own creed--tell all the truth about a person, good or evil, and, if there can be a lesson taught, point it out.

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[13] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 74-75.

[14] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 483.

An occasional thumbnail sketch by Irving brings to the reader aptly and tersely a silhouette of his people. He refers to Rodan, a traitorous friend of Columbus, as "One of those base spirits which grow venomous in the sunshine of prosperity."[15]

Any person who threw stones in the path of Columbus's progress was strongly brought to task by the author. He had little patience with the many who caused trouble after the first voyage and triumphal return of the Admiral. He especially liked to "get lessons" from these acts of important people. He did not bother to tone down his thoughts in order to spare the feelings of the Spanish descendants, and in spite of this or perhaps because of this, he was and is extremely popular among them, even today. Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, Archdeacon of Seville, was the ecclesiastic in charge of Indian affairs for thirty years. He was wealthy, a king's favorite, and one who let personal grievances control his acts. Of him Irving says:

> His perfidious conduct is repeatedly alluded to, but in guarded terms, by contemporary writers of weight and credit, such as the curate of Los Palacios and the bishop, Las Casas, but they were evidently fearful of expressing the fullness of their feelings. Subsequent Spanish historians, always more or less controlled by ecclesiastical supervision, have likewise dealt too favorably with this base-minded man. He deserves to be held up as a warning example of those perfidious beings in office, who too often lie like worms at the root of honorable enterprise , blighting by their unseen influence, the fruits of glorious action, and disappointing the hopes of nations.[16]

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[15] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 160.

[16] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 282.

Irving was perhaps a little too prejudiced, unconsciously, I am sure, in his development of the characters of Columbus and his brothers, as well as of those who aided Columbus as best they could. He reaches the height of eulogistic description in his development of that of Queen Isabella. His vocabulary is eloquent and fluent; she is the antithesis of her monarch-husband. After giving a portrait of her physical appearance, Irving continues:

> She exceeded him [her husband] in beauty, in personal dignity, in acuteness of genius, and in grandeur of soul. Combining the active and resolute qualities of man with the softer charities of woman, she mingled in the warlike councils of her husband, engaged personally in his enterprises, and in some instances surpassed him on the firmness and intrepidity of her measures, while being inspired with a truer idea of glory, she infused a more lofty and generous temper into his subtle and calculating policy.[17]

He tells of the "maternal care" towards her subjects, her almost bigoted piety, her hatred of the Inquisition. She advocated clemency to the Moors, although on occasion she had led her army against them. She surrounded herself with the ablest men of literature and science. She was the guardian angel of Spain. Throughout the history only good is spoken of this much-admired woman, and he reaches the heights of pure laudatory style when he writes of her death.

> She was one of the purest spirits that ever ruled over the destinies of a nation. Had she been spared, her benignant vigilance would have prevented many a scene of horror in the colonization of the New World, and might have softened the lot of its native inhabitants. As it is, her fair name will ever shine with celestial radiance in the dawning of its history.[18]

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[17] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 76-77.

[18] Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 466-467.

From the few samples and excerpts quoted, the reader can get a fair picture of Irving's ability to portray character. Many and human are the people he explains from the heroic Admiral to the disgruntled sailor, who, having lost by judgment of their majesties the reward for sighting land first, left his country and Christian religion for Africa and Mohammedanism. Yes, his characters are common, everyday people--afraid, happy, jealous, proud, generous, grasping, laughing, crying, reverend, impious people. Types we see today appear realistically throughout the adventurous incidents in the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus.

Fortunately for those who believe that Irving's leisurely style is outstanding, the same well-balanced ease is apparent in his first biography. His inherent ability as a story-teller, his picturesque vocabulary, and his detailed and realistic settings also appear in this literary work.

The novelist's touch is noticed in his explanation of early voyages.

> The navigation of the Atlantic was yet in its infancy. Mariners looked with disinterest upon a boisterous expanse, which appeared to have no opposite shore, and feared to venture out of sight of the landmarks. Every bold headland, and far-stretching promontory was a wall to bar their progress. They crept timorously along the Barbary shores, and thought they had accomplished a wonderful expedition when they ventured a few degrees beyond the Strait of Gibralter.[19]

From this excerpt we know not only what was being done, but also what was not being done; and the feelings of the unknown mariners are apparent. His word imagery is exceptionally good.

Irving's characteristic of sudden ironic insight is noted throughout

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[19] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 37.

the story. On one occasion he writes:

> Like many other great projectors, while engaged upon the schemes of vast benefit to mankind, he [Columbus] had suffered his own affairs to go to ruin, and was reduced to struggle hard with poverty; nor is it one of the least interesting circumstances in his eventful life, that he had, in a manner, to beg his way from court to court, to offer the princes the discovery of a new world.[20]

Since we have already noted his eulogistic development of character, it is fitting, at this point, to observe the style with which he furthers this development. Of prime importance to the critic is an author's choice of words. Irving, an idealist and optimist, characteristically chooses laudatory terms, words, and phrases that indicate idealization of his main characters, an idealization that at times becomes effusive. The height of his praise seems to center more on Queen Isabella than on Columbus. Early in the biography before he develops her character to any extent, he writes:

> It is wonderful how much the destinies of countries depend at times on the virtues of individuals, and how it is given to great spirits, by combining, exciting, and directing the latent powers of a nation, to stamp it, as it were, with their own greatness. Such beings realize the idea of guardian angels, appointed by Heaven to watch over the destinies of empires. Such had been Prince Henry for the kingdom of Portugal; and such was now for Spain the illustrious Isabella.[21]

There is careful detail in his writing. This, of course, tends to make his work more realistic and shows to what an extent Irving had gone in preparation for the writing of this life. The following description tells of their nearing Trinidad:

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[20] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 69.

[21] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 78.

> The wind suddenly fell, and a dead sultry calm commenced which lasted for eight days. The air was like a furnace; the tar melted; the seams of the ships yawned; the salt meat became putrid; the wheat was parched as if by fire; the hoops shrank from the wine and water casks, some of which leaked out and some burst; while the heat in the holds of the vessels was so suffocating, that no one could remain below a sufficient time to prevent the damage that was taking place. The mariners lost all strength and spirits, and sank under the oppressive heat. It seemed as if the old fable of the torrid zone was about to be realized; and that they were approaching a fiery region, where it would be impossible to exist. It is true, the heavens were for a part of the time, overcast, and there were drizzling showers; but the atmosphere was close and stifling, and there was that combination of heat and moisture which relaxes all the energies of the human frame.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The length of the voyage had consumed the greater part of their sea-stores; the heat and humidity of the climate, and the leakage of the ships, had damaged the remainder, and their biscuits were so filled with worms, that, notwithstanding their hunger, they were obliged to eat it in the dark, lest their stomachs should revolt at its appearance.[22]

The foregoing detailed account can be compared with our own modern realistic stylists, such as Steinbeck. Yet, this is a phase of style not stressed in either his earlier or later writings. The artist's eye for detail has been communicated to the novelist's pen, and Irving was outstanding as both the artist and the novelist.

When he describes the crowd that went on the second voyage, Irving gives in a few terse explanatory phrases, the people who caused the Paradise of the New World to become in a short time a veritable Hell for natives and white men alike:

> A motley crowd was hurrying on board. . . There was the high-spirited cavalier, bound on romantic enterprise; the hardy navigator, ambitious of acquiring laurels in those unknown seas; the roving adventurer, seeking novelty and excitement; the keen calculating speculator, eager to profit by the ignorance of the savage tribes;

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[22] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 106.

> and the pale missionary from the cloister, anxious to extend the dominions of the church, or devoutly zealous for the propagation of the faith. All were full of animation and lively hope. Instead of being regarded by the populace as devoted men, bound upon a dark and desperate enterprise, they were contemplated with envy, as favored mortals, bound to golden regions and happy climes, where nothing but wealth, and wonder, and delights awaited them. . . .When he [Columbus] passed, every eye followed him with admiration, and every tongue blessed and praised him. Before sunrise the whole fleet was under way; the weather was serene and propitious; and as the populace watched their parting sails brightening in the morning beams, they looked forward to the joyful return, laden with the treasures of the New World.[23]

Irving's natural abilities enables him to understand the feelings of his people, and being primarily a romanticist, his downtrodden people, his characters of adversity, are exceptionally well pictured. He describes effectively the condition of the native slave. Though he never uses a powerful, vigorous speech against such practices, he does give us a clear view of the existing conditions:

> They were obliged to grope day by day, with bending body and anxious eye, along the borders of their rivers, sifting the sands for the grains of gold which every day grew more scanty; or to labor in their fields beneath the fervor of the tropical sun, to raise money for their task masters, or to produce the vegetable tribute impressed upon them. They sank to sleep weary and exhausted at night, with the certainty that the next day was to be a repetition of the same toil and suffering. Or if they occasionally indulged in their national dances, the ballads to which they kept time were of a melancholy and plaintive character.[24]

The depths of despair, the bitterness and hopelessness of Columbus are graphically portrayed when Irving describes him at almost, but not quite, the lowest depths of misery. The incident occurs when Columbus is shipwrecked off one of the small West Indies islands; his hold on Spaniards

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[23] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 301-302.

[24] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 52.

and natives alike is getting weaker; he is confined to his bed by pain and infirmities:

> But he had not yet exhausted his cup of bitterness. He had yet to experience an evil worse than storm, or shipwreck, or bodily anguish, or the violence of savage hordes--the perfidy of those in whom he confided.[25]

This is strong writing for Irving. The mechanics are good, but somehow, it is reminiscent of old-fashioned melodrama. One has by now, in the sixteenth book, got a little tired of the cruelties and hardships, true as they were, that "afflicted" the good explorer. Too much is too much, and one becomes sated and indifferent.

Occasionally Irving breaks out in satire. It is not biting and keen, but rather a subtle satire, a tongue-in-cheek type. Primarily it is aimed at the Spaniards and their policies of church and state. The reaction of his Spanish audience can be gauged by the yardstick of their approval of him, both as a writer of tales and the biographer of Columbus. The following reference appears after the triumphal return of Columbus from his first voyage of exploration:

> In the midst of their rejoicings, the Spanish sovereigns lost no time in taking every measure necessary to secure their new acquisition. Although it was supposed that the countries just discovered were a part of the territories of the Grand Khan, and of other oriental princes, considerably advanced in civilization, yet there does not appear to have been the least doubt of the right of their catholic majesties to take possession of them. During the crusades, a doctrine had been established among Christian princes extremely favorable to their ambitious designs. According to this, they had the right to invade, ravage and seize upon the territories of infidel nations, under the plea of defeating the enemies of Christ and extending the sway of His

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[25] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 387.

church on earth. In conformity to the same doctrine, the Pope, from his supreme authority over all temporal things was considered as empowered to dispose of all heathen lands to such potentates as would engage to reduce them to the dominion of the church, and to propagate the true faith among their benighted inhabitants.[26]

Undoubtedly Irving's best writing is when he is dealing with the pomp and pageantry of the day. He had always been interested in the Moor, and his description of the Moorish War is supreme. This type of incident gives his already-proved powers a chance to appear unobtrusively. Examples of this are his battle scenes and the final surrender of Boabdel, the last of the Moorish kings,who "sallied forth from the Alhambra, and yielded up the keys of that favorite seat of Moorish power . . . After eight hundred years the crescent was completely cast down, the cross exalted in its place."[27] Jubilation was boisterous and wide-spread. Suddenly and powerfully Irving introduces Columbus witnessing "The greatest moment of Spanish history"[28] and being not only indifferent but almost contemptuous of the whole affair. He has had to wait, to trail after their majesties too long to feel joy in anything but his own hoped-for dream.

In comparison with the grandeur of this famous victory, we get the opulence of Columbus's own triumphant return to Barcelona. The climate was favorable; youthful courtiers came to escort him to the city.

His entrance into this noble city has been compared to one of those triumphs which the Romans were accustomed to decree to conquerors. First were paraded the Indians, painted according to their savage

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[26] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 278.

[27] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 107.

[28] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 108.

fashion, and decorated with their national ornaments of gold. After these,were borne various kinds of live parrots, together with stuffed birds and animals of unknown species, and plants supposed to be of precious qualities, while great care was taken to make a conspicuous display of Indians' coronets, bracelets, and other decorations of gold, which might give an idea of the wealth of the newly discovered regions. After this followed Columbus on horseback, surrounded by a brilliant cavalcade of Spanish chivalry. The streets were almost impassable from the countless multitude; the windows and balconies were crowded with the fair; the very roofs were crowded with spectators . . . To receive him with suitable pomp and distinction , the sovereigns had ordered their throne to be placed in public under a rich canopy of brocade of gold, in a vast and splendid salon. Here the king and queen waited his arrival, seated in state, with Prince Juan beside them, and attended by the dignitaries of their court . . . At length Columbus entered the hall, surrounded by a brilliant crowd of cavaliers, among whom he was conspicuous for his stately and commanding person, which with his countenance, rendered venerable by his gray hairs, gave him the august appearance of a senator of Rome; a modest smile lighted up his features, showing that he enjoyed the state and glory in which he came, and certainly nothing could be more deeply moving to a mind inflamed by a noble ambition, and conscious of greatly having desevred, than these testimonials of the admiration and gratitude of a nation, or rather of a world. As Columbus approached, the sovereigns rose, as if receiving a person of the highest rank. Bending his knee, he offered to kiss their hands; but there was some hesitation on their part to accept this act of homage. Raising him in the most gracious manner, they ordered him to seat himself in their presence; a rare honor in this proud and punctilious court.[29]

Washington Irving is not primarily a moralist, but occasionally he indulges his own philosophies of life by pointing out a lesson to be learned from incidents in the lives with which he treats. Although he lived in a comparatively turbulent period of American history, he avoided controversial discussions and so was one of the few people loved by the entire country--North, South, East, and West. Consequently , the occasions when he does express his personal views are of exceptional interest to the thoughtful reader. One of the first of these appears in the second chapter of his

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[29] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 266-268.

first book. He returns this opinion:

> There is a certain meddlesome spirit, which in the garb of learned research, goes prying about the traces of history, casting down the monuments, and marring and mutilating the fairest trophies. Care should be taken to vindicate names from such pernicious erudition. It defeats one of the most salutary purposes of history, that of furnishing examples of what human genius and laudable enterprise may accomplish. In this purpose, some pains have been taken in the preceding chapter, to trace the rise and progress of this grand idea in the mind of Columbus; to show that it was the conception of his genius, quickened by the impulse of the age, and aided by those scattered gleams of knowledge, which fell ineffectually on ordinary minds.[30]

Irving had so often a chance to lash out in speaking of the injustices to the Indians, a chance which he overlooked almost entirely. He feels, however, that some sort of apology is necessary, and in giving it, he ends with a bit of advice to modern governments:

> These details [about tortures] have been withheld from the present work as disgraceful to human nature, and from an unwillingness to advance anything which might convey a stigma on a brave and generous nation. But it would be a departure from historical veracity, having the documents before my eyes, to pass silently over transactions so atrocious, and vouched for by witnesses beyond all suspicion of falsehood. Such occurrences show the extremity to which human cruelty may extend when stimulated by avidity of gain; by a thirst of vengeance; or even by a perverted zeal in the holy cause of religion. Every nation has in turn furnished proofs of this disgraceful truth. As in the present instance, they are commonly the crime of individuals rather than of a nation. Yet it behooves governments to keep a vigilant eye upon those whom they delegate power in remote and helpless colonies. It is the imperious duty of the historian to place these matters upon record, that they may serve as warning beacons to future generations.[31]

It is here that he had a chance to write of the sensational, to gain the reader's attention and popularize his story. Rather does he continue his even, balanced style, never raising his tone but remaining the "gentleman"

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[30] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 55-56.

[31] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 447.

writer of his day.

The ephemeral quality of success enables Irving to philosophize in the midst of the trouble Columbus had after the first successful voyage.

> Envy and malice had been but too successful in undermining the popularity of Columbus. It is impossible to keep up a state of excitement for any length of time, even by miracles. The world, at first, is prompt and lavish in its administration, but soon grows cool, distrusts its late enthusiasm, and fancies it has been defrauded of what it bestowest with such prodigality. It is then that the caviler who had been silenced by the general applause, puts in his insidious suggestion, detracts from the merits of the declining favorite, and succeeds in rendering him an object of doubt and censure, if not of absolute aversion. In three short years the public had become familiar with the stupendous wonder of a newly discovered world and was now open to every insinuation derogatory to the fame of the discoverer and the importance of his enterprise.[32]

On this same strain, but using a particular example of a back-biting friend, he cites the incident of Captain Pinzon, who had deserted Columbus at Cuba, had assumed the honor of the discovery, and had arrived in Spain to find Columbus ahead of him. To his shame (and he seems to have had conscience enough for that) the sovereigns forbade his appearance at court. From that time forth he was a broken man. Irving does not sympathize with him in any way as he writes:

> His story shows how one lapse from duty may counterbalance the merits of a thousand services; how one moment of weakness may mar the beauty of a whole life of virtue; and how important it is for a man, under all circumstances, to be true, not merely to others, but to himself.[33]

Irving is simply putting into prose the famous advice of Polonius in Hamlet:

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[32] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 82.

[33] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 263-264.

And this above all--to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Irving's rather vapid treatment of the horrors and tortures of the Indian by the Spaniard has already been mentioned. Of the first European settlement in the New World he says:

> It presents in a diminutive compass an epitome of the gross vices which degrade civilization, and the grand political errors which sometimes subvert the mightiest empire. All law and order being relaxed by corruption and licentiousness, public good was sacrificed to private interest and passion, the community was convulsed by divers factions and dissensions, until the whole was shaken asunder by two expiring demagogues, ambition to the command of a petty fortress-wilderness and the supreme control of eight and thirty men.[34]

Often does Irving compare the actions of the Indians and the Spaniards, and too often is the comparison detrimental to the Europeans. "Men in civilized life learn magnanimity from precept, but their most generous actions are often rivaled by the deeds of untutored savages who act only from natural impulse."[35]

Shortly after the publication of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, Irving edited an abridged edition. Although necessarily the work is more compact, it is often less interesting in that the author left out many digressive parts worthy of note. I shall mention only a few--interesting and uninteresting. He spends considerable time writing of contemporary voyages of discovery. Portuguese and Spanish--De Gama and Pinzon--are noted in detail. He points out that many of the captains had been under Columbus

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[34] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 329.

[35] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 177.

in his first two voyages to the New World. He relates the interesting fact that Amerigo Vespucci was a sailor under one of these captains. In this Irving is anticipating his second biography about the companions of Columbus.

The author is also interested in the religious and scientific studies of the day. He explains how closely united the two subjects were, and because of the strong ecclesiastical element in the universities, there were no true scientists, for held back by bigotry, the best that could emerge were pseudo-scientists.

One side issue that did not prove particularly interesting was the long discourse on the ancestry of Ferdinand. It did little to further the story, and other than show to what an extent Irving went to get facts and information, it had little real value. Perhaps he felt that the deep contrast between the parental personalities and Ferdinand's would prove profitable to the reader.

Occasionally people themselves are so interesting to Irving that he digresses from his main characters to develop other biographical sketches within the original work. He mentions once that before going on with his work on Columbus he wants to:

> . . .treat of the disasters of the beautiful province of Xaragua, the seat of hospitality, the refuge of the suffering Spaniards; and the fate of the female cacique, Anacaona, once the pride of the island, and the generous friend of white men.[36]

One of the most interesting digressions is that part of the work that explains the ballads and the heroic rhymes of the natives. He tells in de-

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[36] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 429.

tail their native dances, the significance of each, their tribal customs, particularly those with regard to the dead. He hopes by this means to be able to preserve something since no records of their own could be found.

There is hardly an American who does not know that Columbus discovered America in 1492. The mental pictures of that discovery, the images that appear in various minds are numerous. Basically we know Columbus, or we like to think so. There are in Irving's biography many interesting anecdotes and facts, known to a few of us, but fascinating to all of us. The "egg incident" is probably one of the best of the anecdotes remembered. In a note reference, Irving says that it was taken as authority from the Italian historian, Benzoni. Many people have condemned it as trivial, but it is characteristic of the "practical sagacity" of Columbus and "the universal popularity of the anecdote is proof of its merit."[37] This is one of the few occasions in which Irving takes an indefinite reason for proof of its truth.

Of course we <u>know</u> that Columbus was one of the few to believe that the world was round. A new theory on its shape is discovered in the tenth book, in which the idea is set forth that the earth is the shape of a pear. One part is much more elevated than the rest and tapers upward to the skies. This part would be in the interior of the newly founded continent and immediately under the equator. Since Columbus's men never quite penetrated the "interior", the theory was offered without proof.

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[37] <u>Ibid</u>., Vol. I, p. 275, footnote.

Irving uses Columbus's Journal throughout the biography. The Admiral kept this so that the king and queen would know of the entire voyages; it not only deals with the facts but also with his visions and feelings. The religious undertone is exceedingly strong.

The author remarks how singular that the success of this great undertaking (sailing west to Asiatic shores) depended upon two happy errors--both errors of the most learned and profound philosophers, but without which Columbus would hardly have ventured upon his enterprise.

Columbus, in spite of his visionary, dreamlike personality, was practical and somewhat crafty. On his first voyage of discovery he kept two logs--a true one for his eyes alone, a second one for the crew. He was not eager for vital information to leak out among the worthy adventurous captains. On the way home when his ships were tossed about by storms for weeks, he naturally feared they would be wrecked, and no knowledge would reach the rulers. He carefully wrote up the trip, discoveries, places taken in their names, sealed and addressed it to the king and queen. He promised in a note that they would pay one thousand ducats for it delivered unopened. He, then, wrapped all in a wax cloth, put it in a cake of wax, and then into a barrel, and threw it into the sea. He made the crew believe that he was performing a religious rite to assure their safety. He did the same with a copy, but set this barrel on the poop deck so that it would float free if they did sink. As far as Irving is concerned that is the last heard of that ancient "message in a bottle" means of communication.

Irving has little patience with any attempts to lessen the greatness

of the Admiral. In the first book he states:

> An assertion has also been made, that Columbus was preceded in his discoveries by Martin Behem, a contemporary cosmographer, who, it is said, had landed accidentally on the coast of South America, in the course of an African expedition; and that it was with the assistance of a map, or globe, projected by Behem, on which was laid down the newly-discovered country, that Columbus had made his voyage. This rumor originated in an absurd misconstruction of a Latin manuscript, and was unsupported by any documents; yet it has had its circulation, and has even been revived not many years since, with more zeal than discretion; but is now completely refuted, and put to rest. The land visited by Behem, was the coast of Africa beyond the equator; the globe he projected was finished in 1492, while Columbus was absent on his first voyage; it contains no trace of the New World, and thus furnishes conclusive proof, that the existence was yet unknown to Behem.[38]

Irving presents two points of view about the reception Columbus got from the Portuguese king when he laid his plan before the monarch. According to his son, Fernando, Columbus was listened to with close attention. But the king felt that the cost and trouble already sustained by their exploring the African coast were too much. However, Columbus's reasons were so well presented that the king finally consented and the only remaining difficulty was the terms. "Columbus being a man of lofty and noble sentiments, demanded high and honorable titles and rewards, to the end, says Fernando, that he might leave behind him a name and family worthy of his deeds and merits."[39] On the other hand, Joam de Barros, Portuguese historian, attributes the seeming acquiescence of the king merely to the importunities of Columbus. "He considered him a vainglorious man, fond of displaying his abilities, and given to fantastic fancies, such as that

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[38] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 55.

[39] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 64.

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respecting the island of Cipango."[40] Irving notes that vanity on the part of Columbus is stressed by Portuguese historians.

However, in later years, Columbus did come to terms with the Spanish rulers. It was not an easy task, but when the arrangements were made, the conditions were satisfactory to him. The following "Articles of Agreement" were drawn up by the royal secretary, Juan de Colomba:

1. That Columbus should have for himself during his lifetime, and his heirs and successors forever, the office of admiral of all lands and continents which he might discover or acquire in the ocean, with similar honor and prerogatives of those enjoyed by the high admiral of Castile in his district.

2. That he should be viceroy and governor-general over all the said lands and continents; with the privilege of nominating three candidates for the government of each island or province, one of whom should be selected by the sovereign.

3. That he should be entitled to recieve for himself one-tenth of all pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, and all other articles and merchandises, in whatever manner found, bought, bartered or gained within his admiralty, the costs being first deducted.

4. That he or his lieutenant should be the sole judge in all causes and disputes arising out of traffic between those countries and Spain, provided the high admiral of Castile had similar jurisdiction in his district.

5. That he might then, and at all times after, contribute an eighth part of the expense in fitting out vessels to sail on the enterprise, and receive an eighth part of the profits.[41]

This agreement was signed April 17, 1492, at Santa Fe, Granada. Columbus had had this dream for more than eighteen years and had begun to lose hope

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[40] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 65.

[41] Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 114-115.

before it was accomplished. He finally lost these rights through false witnesses. Even though his character was re-instated, his rights never were. Possibly, as Irving believes, because others were now doing as much and not demanding so much from the king.

Probably as popular as the "egg" story is the well-known "Isabella-Jewel" story. Irving relates the incident. The king had listened but had gone against the proposition for a voyage of discovery, using as his excuse the exorbitant cost of the Moorish War. Luis de St. Angel, receiver of ecclesiastical revenue in Arragon, pleaded the cause to eloquently that:

> . . . with an enthusiasm worthy of herself, and of the cause, Isabella exclaimed, "I undertake the enterprise for my own crown of Castile and will pledge my jewels to raise the necessary funds"; this was the proudest moment in the life of Isabella; it stamped her renown forever as the patroness of the discovery of the New World.[42]

We learn that St. Angel, glad to get royal consent, replied that there was no need of the sale, but he would advance the funds to seventeen thousand (17000) florins. The accountant of St. Angel got it from the treasury of King Ferdinand!

The trouble in the later voyages of discovery and settlement was due primarily to the Spanish dons who refused to be ruled by a "foreigner". Yet, one Spanish gentleman was to be trusted and upon him responsibility could be laid. Don Alonso de Ojeda was a daring spirit who was on the voyage for the mere excitement of it all. Irving presents this anecdote about him. There was a beam so high in the air that it dwarfed the spectators on the ground. It ran twenty feet from the tower of the Cathedral

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[42] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 112.

of Seville, where the Queen was holding court. He walked to the end, stood on one leg, and returned. He put one foot against the wall and threw an orange to the top of the tower as proof of his muscular strength. It is later that his bravery in bearding one of the fiercest caciques in his own territory saved face for the Spaniards and averted serious trouble with the natives.

Many are the facts that could be mentioned here, facts that are known by only a few, but have been proved, for the most part, authentic and remain interesting to us today.

The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus is an example of historical biography at its best. It is a complete and rapid story which goes from idea to idea with graceful ease. Some may say that there is too much history, but Columbus and history are synonymous; it is impossible to separate them.

Irving's style is clear and natural for the age in which he wrote. There are balance, melody, and unity of tone. Sympathy and sincerity, together with an underlying current of refinement, characterize his treatment. Idealism is prevalent, but too prosaic a touch would have ruined the biography. Irving had the creative touch that gives universal romantic interest to what is described. He realized the need of writing for the "general public", rather than for the scholarly few. He understood the advantages of individual personalities in his narrative, so he created living people. It is still one of the most popular books among the Spanish, who consider it the best biography of Columbus written in any language.

Irving collected facts; he checked and rechecked his information, yet because of his close use of Navarrete's published documents, he is not well accepted by the more scientific modern biographers who are against his method of not being more specific in his acknowledgments. But these writers seem to forget that such was the practice of authors in the last century; and, in our belief, present writers and critics tend not to give him the credit that he deserves in view of the age in which he wrote. They seem to forget that his work was accepted and important in an age of different standards. Irving must be considered not only by our present day qualifications but also by the code of his own age.

Columbus was for many years the layman's best source of the life of a famous explorer. Today more information has been discovered concerning the Admiral, and close research has shown that Irving in several parts of the work has given too free a translation, and as a result has misinterpreted certain facts. The latter is a fault especially frowned upon in modern life writing, even as it was in earlier days.

A little more than a century after the publication of Irving's Columbus, there appeared in America Admiral of the Ocean Sea by Samuel Eliot Morison. The author pointed out with pride that he was the only one since Irving to go to the very source of information. However, he felt that a good life of Columbus could not be written by an arm-chair author, but must contain a sailor's point of view. His book is interesting in that he sailed, as exactly as possible, the various routes of Columbus to the New World. He commented on the miraculous seamanship of the Admiral, who, destined by Fate, seemed always to find the safest harbors and the most

advantageous winds. Morison's speech is racy and full of slang; the book teems with navigation terms of longitude, latitude, and wind directions, which grow monotonous as the story continues. There is no character development;therefore, there is little or no human interest. The book has been based on scientific research completed in the most approved modern method. However, the average reader, we believe, although he can get some enjoyment from the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, will find that it lacks much of the charm and humanity of Irving's Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus. For, despite the weaknesses, Irving's first biography was an accomplishment of which he could be rightfully proud.

## CHAPTER II

## VOYAGES AND DISCOVERIES OF THE COMPANIONS OF COLUMBUS

Invariably when one considers Irving's first serious biography, Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, one also recalls its companion-piece, the Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus. However, this book in its entirety proves to be a disappointment as one gets the impression that this second work was merely an afterthought, that in searching the archives for his Columbian material, Irving accumulated many incidental facts about persons connected directly or indirectly with the great Admiral and felt that such hard-sought information augmented by additional work should be published in an additional volume. We know from his Journal that he worked conscientiously and seriously on this book, revising parts of it many times before publication, but it remains a poor second when compared with the first biography.

The work is a series of sketches of the discoveries of the contemporaries, not the companions of Columbus. The only explorer who had had any association with the Admiral was Alonzo de Ojeda, whom we mentioned in the first chapter. Irving's treatment of the lives is similar to that of Columbus, but necessarily more concise. His attitude toward the adventurers is more objective and sometimes coldly unsympathetic. Whereas he got somewhat indignant over the unjust treatment to which Columbus and his

brothers were subjected, he is mildly resentful of the same thing when it occurs to his Spanish explorers in the Companions. Each life, with the exception of Balboa and Ponce de Leon, is monotonously alike; the leader gets permission from Bishop Don Juan Rodriguez Fonseca, labors to get his fleet together, arrives at his destination after much trouble to encounter graver trouble, has a short time of ruling power most satisfactory to the hard-working explorer, who finally falls into disgrace, dying in shame or poverty. Irving mentions incidentally only two explorations that were in any way successful for the leaders of these expeditions. The lot of the Spanish explorer in the New World was harsh and disastrous. Irving's charm of style is apparent in this volume, but because of the similarity of treatment, as is often the case, too much charm is cloying. A sharp outburst is needed in the midst of his leisurely, smooth-flowing style in order to awaken the flagging interest of the reader.

The first biographical sketch deals with the voyages of Alonzo de Ojeda. At the onset Irving mentions that this Spanish don was accompanied by Amerigo Vespucci, The reader's interest immediately focuses on Vespucci's part in the expedition. Perhaps that is the outstanding attitude toward the whole volume. Vespucci, Balboa, Ponce de Leon--names known to all American children leap from the pages and claim the primary attention of the reader. There is too much similarity between the two biographies, Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus and Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus; and it is only after one notices people with whom one has a nodding acquaintance that interest is aroused.

Occasionally, as in the previous volume, Irving inserts a few

personal reactions. In the following incident he finds a chance to express his attitude toward the legal profession. Don Ojeda, to save his colony from destruction by Indians, went with a pirate group for help. After being gone for several hours, they seized him and chained him below deck. However, needing his knowledge of navigation during a storm, they freed him but too late to save the ship, Eventually he led the group who survived the wreck through the jungles to Hispaniola. He was accused of piracy, and his effects were seized for debts. After appealing to the sovereign, he was acquitted by the Royal Council, and a mandate ordered the restitution of his property.

> It appears, however, that the costs of justice, or rather of the law, consumed his share of the treasure of the strong box, and that a royal order was necessary to liberate him from the hands of the governor; so that like too many other litigants, he finally emerged from the labyrinths of the law a triumphant client, but a ruined man.[1]

Irving's strong dislike for King Ferdinand is also apparent in this book. The author recalls Columbus's belief that he had discovered those mines, the Aurea Chersonesus of the ancients, where Solomon got gold for the temple in Jerusalem. Other voyagers had seemed to corroborate this belief, so that the king was resolved to found regular, permanent colonies along the coast of Terra Firma and place it all under the command of some capable leader. Columbus had in his last voyage planned the same thing but had experienced trouble with the natives of Veragua.

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[1] Washington Irving, Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus (New York: G. P. Putnam and Company, 1853), p. 58.

> The Admiral being dead, the person who should naturally have presented himself to the mind of the sovereign for this particular service was Don Bartholomew; but, the wary and selfish monarch knew the Adelantado to be as lofty in his terms as his late brother, and preferred to accomplish his purposes by cheaper agents. He was unwilling, also, to increase the consequence of a family, whose vast but just claims were already a cause of repining to his sordid and jealous spirit. He looked around, therefore, among the groups of adventurers, who had sprung up in the school of Columbus, for some individual ready to serve him on more accommodating terms.[2]

The man chosen by the king was Captain Juan de la Cosa, a man against whom, therefore, Irving might have had some feeling but who became the most sympathetically treated character in the entire volume. Captain de la Cosa appealed to the romanticist in Irving since he gave his life defending that of his brash young friend, de Ojeda, from the poisoned arrows of the Indians. It is in relating the death of this simple, courageous sailor that Irving again uses, to its greatest advantage, the eulogistic style that had appeared so frequently in Columbus.

> Thus fell the hardy Juan de la Cosa, faithful and devoted to the very last; nor can we refrain from pausing to pay a passing tribute to his memory. He was acknowledged by his contemporaries to be one of the ablest of those gallant Spanish navigators who first explored the way to the New World. But it is by the honest and kindly qualities of his heart that his memory is most endeared to us; it is, above all, by the loyalty in friendship displayed in this his last and fatal expedition. Warmed by his attachment for a more youthful and hot-headed adventurer, we see this wary veteran of the seas forgetting his usual prudence and the lessons of his experience, and embarking heart and hand, purse and person, in the wild enterprises of his favorite, we behold him watching over him as a parent, remonstrating with him as a counselor, but fighting for him as a partisan; following him without hesitation, into known and needless danger, to certain death itself, and showing no other solicitude in his dying moments, but to be remembered by his friend.[3]

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[2] Ibid., p. 60.

[3] Ibid., p. 74.

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Irving himself sensed in relating the escape and subsequent rescue of Ojeda by Nicuesa's men that perhaps it was too romantically treated or that his readers would believe it to be mere romance rather than fact. Therefore he quotes his authority at great length in Spanish from Las Casas's history. Ojeda had vowed that if he survived that particular expedition, he would erect an altar to the Virgin and leave there his much-treasured oil painting of the Virgin presented to him by the bishop, a painting which had become a talisman against bad luck and personal injury. The romance of the story appealed to Irving so much that he has made this incident one of the most interesting in the volume. True talisman or not, it is only after he had performed his vow and left the picture that Ojeda was wounded almost fatally by a poisoned arrow, the greatest dread of these brave Spaniards. Las Casas arrived later at the village of Cueybàs to view the oratory erected by Ojeda. He found the place sacred to the Indians, and the picture adored by them. He offered to give an image of the Virgin which he had brought in exchange for the oil painting. The chief did not answer directly, but next morning he did not appear before the Spanish historian. The relic had disappeared, and the Indian did not return with it until all the Spaniards had left.

Again and again, as in the previous biography, Irving extols the kindness of the Indians toward the foreigners when they themselves were treated thus. The author cites many examples when lives were saved by such kindness. And again as in Columbus, he berates the treatment usually extended the Indians by the explorers:

Nothing could be more chivalrous, urbane, and charitable; nothing

more pregnant with noble sacrifice of passion and interest, with magnanimous instances of forgiveness of injuries and noble contests of generosity, than the transactions of the discoverers with each other; but the moment they turned to treat with the Indians, even with brave and high-minded caciques, they were vindictive, blood-thirsty, and implacable.[4]

Probably one of the two Spaniards most interesting to us is Vasco Nuñez de Balboa. We learn that to escape debtors, Nuñez hid in a cask, was carried aboard the ship of Martin Fernandez de Enciso, the Bachelor, partner of de Ojeda, was discovered and punished but allowed to remain after Enciso recognized the traits of leadership in this vigorous red-head. These same characteristics Enciso had occasion to regret later. When dissatisfied followers of the Bachelor overthrew him, they chose Vasco Nuñez to be the governor of Darien. His leadership insured to a greater extent the safety of the colony, for he was an especial favorite of the Indians from whom he got the information of the Great Sea. He was warned by them not to seek it without more men, for it was necessary to traverse territory of a war-like cacique. When he heard nothing from Don Diego Columbus, from whom he had sought reinforcements, Nuñez set out with a few loyal followers. Irving handles the discovery of the Pacific Ocean with the touch of the master that he is. He also becomes enthusiastic in his praise of the deeds of the early Spanish explorers and particularly of one great accomplishment by Balboa.

There are points in the history of these Spanish discoveries of the western hemisphere, which make us pause with wonder and admiration at the daring spirit of the men who conducted them, and the appalling difficulties surmounted by their courage and perseverance. We know few instances, however, more striking than the piece-meal transportation,

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[4] Ibid., p. 97.

across the mountains of Darien, of the first European ships that ploughed the waves of the Pacific; and we can readily excuse the boast of the old Castilian writers, when they exclaim, "that none but Spaniards could have conceived or persisted in such an undertaking and no commander in the New World but Vasco Nuñez could have conducted it to a successful issue.[5]

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, denying it to the end, was executed in 1517 at Acla as a traitor to the crown. Irving, as a rare favor, personally acquits him of the "senseless idea of rebelling against the crown."[6] The Spaniard's head was placed upon a pole and exhibited for several days in the public square by Adrarias.

Thus perished, in his forty-second year, in the prime and vigor of his days and the full career of his glory, one of the most illustrious and deserving of Spanish discoverers; a victim to the basest and most perfidious envy.

His fate like that of his renowned predecessor, Columbus, proves that it is sometimes dangerous even to deserve too greatly.[7]

Irving concludes the discoveries with a brief story of Ponce de Leon, the conqueror of Porto Rico and discoverer of Florida. The author attempts to lighten the credulity of the old Spaniard by saying that not only did voyagers believe in the Fountain of Youth, but also men of learning gave credit to the story.

After his disappointment at not being able to renew his youth, Ponce de Leon returned once more to settle in Porto Rico. When, jealously, he felt that the exploits of Hernando Cortez threatened to eclipse his own

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[5] Ibid., p. 232.

[6] Ibid., p. 244.

[7] Ibid., p. 246.

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achievements, he decided to conquer Florida which he had learned was a part of Terra Firma and not the island he had thought. He returned from his expedition wounded and fever-stricken. And as it has been stated, "The discovery that Juan Ponce flattered himself was to lead to a means of perpetuating his life, had the ultimate effect of hastening his death."[8]

The final book on Spanish discoveries is completed by an appendix about one-third the entire volume in length. It opens with an essay on the "Transportation of the Remains of Columbus from San Domingo to Havana" and concludes with the "Manifesto of Alonzo de Ojeda", a formula read by friars with Ojeda before his attack on the savages of Carthagena, and later adopted by Spanish discoverers in general in their invasions of Indian countries. Biographies of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville are included, as well as a theory about Atlantis. Irving had accumulated many and varied facts; some interesting, some boring; yet to him evidence that he was not only a teller of tales but also a student and scholar of research. He was afraid that his tales and essays were not serious enough to insure lasting fame; so to impress upon the public his scholarship, he edited many unnecessary chapters.

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[8] Ibid., p. 287.

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## CHAPTER III

## LIFE OF OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Irving's third important biography, Life of Oliver Goldsmith, was published in 1849 from a sketch written almost twenty years previously. In the Preface, he acknowledged indebtedness to Mr. James Prior, "who had collected and collated the most minute particles of the poet's history with unwearied research and scrupulous fidelity."[1] Yet Irving felt that the book was so cumbersome and detailed that the populace would be uninterested in Prior's work. At about the time that Irving's revised Life was published, Dr. John Forster's Goldsmith, also based on Prior's work, appeared. Although he realized that the simultaneous appearance of two similar lives was somewhat awkward for both writers, Irving felt that having already written so much on his own work, he was committed to complete the biography. He apologized for the hurried manner of his biography and suggested that any reader who wanted a more detailed account of Goldsmith's life read either Prior's or Forster's book. Never did any professional jealousy appear in Irving, who, as a successful literary man, went out of his way to help others in the field in which he was already a leader.

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[1] Washington Irving, Life of Oliver Goldsmith (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske, and Company, no date), p. 3.

Irving has created in this biography an excellent interpretation of character with an exquisite, sympathetic treatment. His style is considerably different from that of his other biographies. In those he stressed the historical background of the age and placed his heroes in that background. In Goldsmith the setting is immaterial; the character is all-important; but if any background does stand out, it is rather the literary setting with the famous men of the well-known Literary Club who are with slight, suggestive touches of character sketching charmingly brought to the attention of the reader. Charles Richardson claims that it is "one of the best biographies in the whole range of English literature."[2] William Cullen Bryant wrote of this work, "I have read no biographical work which carries forward the reader so delightfully. I know of nothing like it."[3]

There is little to wonder at in the enthusiastic reception given this short life of so fascinating a writer. Irving himself maintains that it was a "labor of love", and being that and not a work of necessity or drudgery, it naturally surpasses his other life works. Irving was probably the most able man in the nineteenth century to understand and sympathize with this peculiar, loveable Irishman. They were alike in their roving dispositions. It was hard for both men to settle down to systematic life and work, although Irving became settled in life before his hero-model.

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[2] Charles Richardson, American Literature (1605-1885) (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895), p. 276.

[3] William Cullen Bryant. This was a comment on a circular advertizing the publication of the Life of Oliver Goldsmith by G. P. Putnam.

Both men through adversity and success kept a cheerful, humorous outlook on life and the world. Both men remained bachelors after unhappy love affairs in early life. And surprisingly both authors fancied the world would be eased and pleased by the music of the flute. Irving had admired the style of Goldsmith and as a youth had read his literary works with eagerness, absorbing the philosophy and style of his vagabond teacher. So much did they have in common; so well did Irving sympathize with his topic that at the age of sixty-six, even when working on his Life of Washington, he "threw off" in sixty days his most brilliant, delightful work.

Irving has been especially just in his treatment of his hero, the happy-go-lucky Goldsmith. He does not intend to be the critic but merely the raconteur of Goldsmith's life. He says, "As we do not pretend in this summary memoir to go into the criticism or analysis of Goldsmith's writings, we shall not dwell on the peculiar merits of this poem [ 'The Deserted Village' ]."[4] But, yet, when he speaks of Goldsmith's History of England, he writes, "It possessed the same kind of merits as his other historical compilations; a clear, succinct narrative, a simple, easy, and graceful style, and an agreeable arrangement of fact, but was not remarkable for either depth of observation or minute accuracy of research."[5] It appears to the reader that this observation of Irving might easily and aptly, but for the last phrase, "or minute accuracy of research", apply to some of his

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[4] Washington Irving, op. cit., p. 166.

[5] Ibid., p. 183.

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own biographies as well as to the history of Goldsmith.

Irving's appreciation of Goldsmith's style appears in almost the only reference to Goldsmith's works when he writes toward the close of the biography:

> We shall not pretend to follow these anecdotes of the life of Goldsmith with any critical dissertation on his writings; their merits have long since been fully discussed, and their station in the scale of literary merit permanently established. They have outlasted generations of works of higher power and wider scope, and will continue to outlast the succeeding generations, for they have that magic charm of style by which works are embalmed to perpetuity.[6]

Irving has said that he does not intend to give a character analysis of Goldsmith as he did of Columbus. However, it is not necessary, for throughout the biography his method of telling the facts and incidents of Goldsmith's life gives us what we want with no set, stereotyped character sketch at the end of the book. The author is very good in his miniature drawings of people. On one occasion, with few words he compares and contrasts Goldsmith and Johnson:

> Goldsmith, buoyant, heedless, sanguine, tolerant of evils and easily pleased, had shifted along by any expedient; cast down at every turn, but rising again with indomitable good-humor, and still carried forward by his talent of hoping. Johnson, melancholy and hypochondriacal, and prone to apprehend the worst, yet sternly resolute to battle with and conquer it, had made his way doggedly and gloomily, but with a noble principle of self-reliance and a disregard of foreign aid.[7]

Irving by means of his <u>Life of Oliver Goldsmith</u> has given us a counterpart of Boswell's <u>Life of Johnson</u>. The portraiture of Goldsmith as

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[6] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 253.

[7] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 89.

given us by the Scotchman is hardly flattering and truly unsympathetic. Although we must remember that Goldsmith is, in Irving's estimation, a hero; he is, too, a human being with all the faults and virtues of a human being, and Irving in all fairness treats him as such a person. And so, perhaps because of the treatment that Boswell affords Goldsmith, Irving seems to detest him even more than he did Ferdinand of Spain. One of the mildest descriptions of Boswell is that one by which he calls him the "incarnation of toadyism."[8] Irving in his own kindliness and generosity despises the littleness of Boswell. When he relates an incident in Goldsmith's life, one that was referred to disparagingly in Boswell's work, an invitation by Johnson to Goldsmith in which Boswell was left out, Irving says that "Boswell felt it with all the jealousy of a little mind."[9] And continuing to explain how Boswell got the friendship of Johnson, he writes, ". . . not like Goldsmith, by the force of unpretending merit, but by the course of the most pushing, contriving, and spaniel-like subserviency."[10] He recounts Boswell's mentioning that Goldsmith had been slighted by Lord Camden at a tea, and Goldsmith referred to this slight by saying that Lord Camden took no more notice of him than of an ordinary man. Boswell represents the company as laughing at this piece of "diverting simplicity. And foremost among the laughers was doubtless the rattle-pated Boswell."[11] Again Irving

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[8] Ibid., p. 110.

[9] Ibid., p. 98.

[10] Ibid., p. 98.

[11] Ibid., p. 179.

says, "Boswell's inveterate disposition to toad was a sore cause of mortification to his father, the old laird of Auchinleck."[12]

In Boswell's Johnson, there is an anecdote in which on one occasion when Johnson was about to speak, Goldsmith was asked by a Swiss doctor to be silent so that he might hear Johnson. Boswell ends the incident here to show Goldsmith's desire for the center of the stage and his pique at not receiving it. Irving adds the rest of the story:"'Are you sure, sir, that you can comprehend what he says?' Goldsmith replied. This rebuke which gives the zest to the anecdote is omitted by Boswell, who probably did not perceive the point of it."[13]

Kenrick, the critic, comes in for some scathing remarks by Irving. As a critic, the man was mean and personal. "Doctor Johnson characterized his literary career in one sentence, 'Sir, he is one of the many who have made themselves public without making themselves known.'"[14] The following reference is reminiscent of his adverse comments in Columbus when Irving writes:"One base wretch deserves to be mentioned, the reptile Kenrick, who, after having repeatedly slandered Goldsmith, while living, had the audacity to insult his memory when dead."[15]

Irving perhaps because of the too one-sided idolatry of Boswell,

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[12] Ibid., p. 227.

[13] Ibid., p. 233.

[14] Ibid., p. 85.

[15] Ibid., p. 251.

seemed to take delight in proving Dr. Johnson wrong or in being worsted on occasion by Goldsmith. When "Johnson observed that Goldsmith's genius flowered late; he should have said it flowered early, but was late in bringing its fruit to maturity."[16] The Literary Club was meeting and the question came up whether or not people who disagreed on a major point could live together in friendship. Johnson said that they could. Goldsmith said that they could not and proved his argument by a reference to the "Blue Beard" story. Johnson, using personalities, roared him down. Irving comments:

> Who will not say that Goldsmith had the best of the petty contest? How just was his remark! How felicitous the illustration of the blue chamber! but rude and overbearing was the argumentum ad hominem of Johnson, when he felt that he had the worst of the argument![17]

There are some who may wonder if Irving was not doing in his biography what Boswell did in his--presenting a one-sided picture of the virtues of this man. Occasionally this might seem true, but when we consider the overall picture of the life, we realize that Irving has been impartial; he rarely excuses the faults of Goldsmith; he tries to show that some were caused by heedlessness and generosity, but the faults are there. Only against Boswell does he seem to be hitting when he puts Johnson in the worse light, for he often refers to Johnson's taking Goldsmith's part against Boswell. There are several references in the Life of Johnson to

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[16] Ibid., p. 60.

[17] Ibid., p. 190.

Goldsmith's jealousy over Johnson's conversational powers. Irving agrees that the Irishman lacked the ability to express himself well verbally and quotes Johnson as remarking, "No man is more foolish than Goldsmith when he has not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he has."[18] But the author refuses to accept the Boswellian fact that jealousy was evident on such occasions.

In presenting certain traits, Irving shows considerable insight into Goldsmith's character, almost taking a personal view of an incident. Early in the biography, he mentions that one of Goldsmith's many projects was to decipher the inscriptions on the Written Mountains. The author comments:

> This was probably one of the many dreamy projects with which his fervid brain was apt to teem. On such subjects he was prone to talk vaguely and magnificently, but inconsiderately from the kindled imagination rather than a well-instructed judgment. He had always a great notion of expeditions to the East, and wonders to be seen and effected in the oriental countries.[19]

Irving also refers to his religious attitude:

> His religion has been called in question by Johnson and Boswell; he certainly had not the gloomy, hyphchondriacal piety of the one, nor the babbling mouth-piety of the other; but the spirit of Christian charity breathed forth in his writings and illustrated in his conduct give us reason to believe he had the indwelling religion of the soul.[20]

Naturally the biography abounds in anecdotes concerning both Goldsmith and his friends. There appear the incident of the red breeches that kept him from getting an appointment to consider entry into the clergy, the incident of his missing his boat to America where he planned to make a

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[18] Ibid., p. 126.

[19] Ibid., p. 56.

[20] Ibid., pp. 256-257.

fortune, the incident of his pawning borrowed clothes so that the children of his landlady might have food. The following anecdote refers to the time when he was practicing medicine most unsuccessfully among the poorer people of London. He felt that it behooved him to dress the part of a physician. ( His interest in clothes, loud and of clashing colors, is noticeable throughout the book.)

> The tarnished finery of green and gold had been succeeded by a professional suit of black, to which, we are told, were added the wig and cane indispensable to medical doctors in those days. The coat was a second hand one, of rusty velvet, with a patch on the left breast, which he adroitly covered with his three-cornered hat during his medical visits; and we have an amusing anecdote of his contest of courtesy with a patient who persisted in endeavoring to release him from his hat, which only made him press it more devoutly to his heart.[21]

One of the several people referred to in the biography was John Newbery, an English editor-publisher. Today the Newbery Medal is awarded for the best juvenile book of the year to commemorate the man who specialized in children's books at the time when books for the young were not so popular nor numerous as today. However Irving felt about Mr. Newbery's contribution in that field, because of his dealings with the poorer writers of his day, the author made this remark about him when mentioning his death:

> He coined the brains of his authors in the times of their exigency, and made them pay dear for the plank put out to keep them from drowning. It is not likely his death caused much lamentation among the scribbling tribe; we may express decent respect for the memory of the just, but we shed tears only at the grave of the generous.[22]

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[21] Ibid., p. 56.

[22] Ibid., p. 139.

Such a reference is typical of Washington Irving in all of his biographies. He resents any wrong done his heroes as if they were wrongs done personally to him. He appears to live the lives of his men, absorbing their troubles and triumphs equally sincerely, and any who have brought trouble and disaster to his principal characters must be presented in their true light. Rather than the thoroughly objective view desired today in the writing of biographies, personalities creep in and--weak or not--make his lives more interesting to the general reader.

As a literary biography Irving's Life of Oliver Goldsmith is one of the best written during the nineteenth century, and as a life of Goldsmith it is one of the most understanding, the most delightful that has been written in any age.

## CHAPTER IV

## MAHOMET AND HIS SUCCESSORS

If any reader in selecting Mahomet and His Successors thinks he is getting a second Alhambra with all its lush Oriental setting, its pomp and circumstance, he will be disappointed. Occasionally are there hints of such a background, but they are merely hints. However, if the reader wishes to read of the start of Mohammedanism and the character of the last Prophet, the Prophet of the Sword, this biography of Irving is interesting and worth while. The book is divided into two parts. The first deals with an explanation of Arabia and a sketch of the Biblical tribes that settled there and in its vicinity. Then Irving gives an almost objective life of Mahomet. The second part of the biography tells of the successors, starting with Abu Beker, the first Caliph elected in 632, and carrying the story to the place where permission is asked of Waled, the twelfth Caliph, to attempt to seize what is now Spain after having conquered the lands to the Gates of Hercules. The latter part cannot truthfully be called a biography, but it is a very interesting historical development of the political and imperial sway of the Islamites. After the first four Caliphs the work becomes merely a series of battles, of civil wars, of craft and treachery on the part of illustrious Arabian generals whose very names struck terror into the hearts of the yet unconquered tribes and nations. The religious

aspect of the Arabian Conquest weakens as the history continues; the Caliphs become pleasure-loving and effeminate as they assume the habits of the Persians; rifts appear among the Moslems with Mecca, Medina, and Damascus as focal points of trouble. But Irving ends his work on this vein:

> We have shown the handful of proselytes of a psuedo prophet, driven from city to city, lurking in dens and caves of the earth; but at length rising to be leaders of armies and mighty conquerors; overcoming in pitched battle the Roman cohort, and the Grecian phalanx, and the gorgeous hosts of Persia; carrying their victories from the gates of the Caucasus to the western descents of Mount Atlas, from the banks of the Ganges to the Sus, the ultimate river in Mauretania; and now planting their standards on the pillars of Hercules, and threatening Europe with like subjugation.
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> Here, however, we stay our hand. Here we lay down our pen. Whether it will ever be our lot to resume this theme, to cross with the Moslem hosts the strait of Hercules, and narrate their memorable conquest of Gothic Spain, is one of those uncertainties of mortal life and aspirations of literary zeal which beguile us with agreeable dreams, but too often end in disappointment.[1]

The second part may be straight history, but it will be hard to find a history with the unique personal conclusion with which Irving ends his work.

Irving, after his life in Spain and the interest that he took in the past and present of that country, naturally was intrigued by the romance of the career of Mahomet and the development of his religious and political empire. In the Preface of his work he asknowledged the incompleteness of his topic, saying that it was the type of work for a family

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[1] Washington Irving, Mahomet and His Successors (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske, and Company, no date), pp. 498-499.

library. "The author lays no claim to novelty of fact; nor profundity of research."[2] He has united fact with fiction and has done it in so masterly a way that the books are good reading, if not good biography. He did not seek the underlying philosophy of each event, nor did he claim to have done so. The reader is told what to expect, and, if he is disappointed, it is his own fault and not that of Irving.

The author's treatment of Mahomet is probably his least sympathetic, or so it appears until one reads his character analysis, the same type of thing that appeared in Columbus, at the conclusion of part one. Here he analyses the double character of Mahomet. The first is the zealous, sincere prophet, the man who believes in the unity of God and not the Trinity; the second, the man who, led on by hysterical desire for power, wants a temporal, worldly empire.

Irving notes the start of Mahomet's belief in his being a prophet after he becomes middle aged. Up to that time he seems to have had no conception of his divine purpose on earth, but once convinced, by the help of his wife, Cadijah, he lets nothing stand in his way of being the last of the prophets, and in his mind the strongest of them all, including Adam, Moses, and Jesus. Moslem writers naturally stressed the miracles performed by this humble man. Legends upon legends have grown about him, and Irving relates several--always with a tongue-in-cheek-attitude and a practical explanation. He relates that at the beginning of Mahomet's claiming to be the last prophet, unbelievers said that he must prove it by some miracle.

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[2] Ibid., p. 3.

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Jesus had performed many and had established his claim by such means. The talk was so strong that some of his own disciples began to wonder and urged him to change the hill of Safa to gold. He went aside and prayed, returned with the announcement that the angel, Gabriel, had appeared to him and told him that if he accomplished this miracle, all unbelievers would be destroyed, so "in pity to the multitude, therefore, who appeared to be a stiff-necked generation, he would not expose them to destruction; so the hill of Safa was permitted to remain in its pristine state."[3] Again when assassins came to his house and surprised him, he threw dust into their eyes, blinding them so that he escaped by walking through the midst of them. Irving continues: "The most probable account is that he clambered over the wall in the rear of the house, by the help of a servant, who bent his back for him to step upon it."[4] For a person who is such a romanticist, Irving can be very practical at times. The early devotees of Mahomet tell the story of his childhood when angels visited him , and at this

> . . . supernatural visitation, it is added, was impressed between the shoulders of the child the seal of prophecy, which continued throughout life the symbol and credential of his divine mission; though unbelievers saw nothing in it but a large mole, the size of a pigeon's egg.[5]

Yet, Irving in commenting on the many miracles attributed to Mahomet is fair in making the following statement: "They are probably as true as many other of the wonders related of the prophet. It will be remembered that he

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[3] Ibid., p. 57.

[4] Ibid., p. 84.

[5] Ibid., p. 28.

himself claimed but one miracle,'The Koran'."[6]

As Irving writes of the Prophet, he does not praise him as he does Columbus and Washington; he is not warmly sympathetic with his faults as he is with those of Goldsmith; he seems almost indifferent in his treatment until Mahomet begins to make personal some of the power supposedly granted him from Heaven. The author does commend him for his faithfulness to his first wife, but after her death he marries many, the figures range from nine to twenty-five wives. By his law put into the Koran each follower was permitted four wives; however, he did not limit himself, "for he observed that a prophet, being peculiarly gifted and privileged, was not bound to restrict himself to the same laws as ordinary mortals."[7] When Irving notes that he no longer considers himself equal to others, his attitude becomes a little more sarcastic, and his feeling a little bit colder. He credits Mahomet's preaching as following "for a time the benignity of the Christian faith",[8] but when the Prophet once starts the use of the sword, Irving writes:

> Worldly passions and worldly interests were fast getting the ascendency over that religious enthusiasm which first inspired him. As has been observed, the first drop of blood shed in his name in the Holy Week displayed him a man in whom the slime of earth had quenched the holy flame of prophecy.[9]

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[6] Ibid., p. 66, footnote.

[7] Ibid., p. 68.

[8] Ibid., p. 90.

[9] Ibid., p. 99.

As long as he held closely to Christian tenets, Irving said little against him; never did he speak harshly against him even later, but the reader can feel the change in Irving's own attitude when he makes the statement, "He now arrived at a point where he completely diverged from the celestial spirit of the Christian doctrines, and stamped his religion with the alloy of fallible mortality."[10]

In this work as in the others, Irving's style remains much the same. It is, perhaps, a little more straightforward, somewhat simpler. There are not the long descriptive passages found in the other works. The activity of the story is carried along without being too much padded in his leisurely way. Still, bits of humor appear here and there, and it always seems to be a slight chuckling against the omnipotence of the Prophet. Irving tells of the Mohammedan calendar which had to have added one intercalary year at the end of each thirty-third year. There was no indication of season, as each year began earlier by eleven days. As a result, during the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca the half-naked garb might be worn in the hottest summer or the coldest winter.

> Thus Mahomet, though according to legendary history, he could order the moon from the firmament and make her revolve about the sacred house, could not control her monthly revolutions; and found that the science of numbers is superior even to the gift of prophecy, and sets miracles at defiance.[11]

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[10] Ibid.,p. 95.

[11] Ibid., p. 221.

Irving completes the first part of the biography with a comprehensive character analysis of Mahomet. He sympathized with the Christian elements of the religion of Islam; he honored the religious simplicity of the man who fought so earnestly to overcome idolatry; but, when fanatically the soldiers of Islam were allowed to pillage, plunder, and slaughter, supposedly for the purpose of conversion, but actually, as Irving felt, for riches and power, he no longer approved of Mohammedanism.

Mahomet and His Successors, as a biography, does not rank so high as his lives of Goldsmith, Columbus, or Washington. Yet it is easier reading and lighter despite its theme than either of the latter two historical biographies.

## CHAPTER V

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Besides the longer biographies already mentioned, Irving wrote several sketches that appeared generally in magazine publications. The sketches to be mentioned are divided into three parts: the first deals with his naval heroes and appeared in the Analectic Magazine, a monthly periodical published in Philadelphia and edited by Irving in 1813 and 1814, the period in our history that our Navy showed itself worthy of acknowledgment abroad; the second consists of two short lives, Thomas Campbell and Washington Allston; the third is the life of Margaret Davidson, written at the request of her mother to be an introduction to a collection of her poems.

The naval biographies are pure patriotic essays appearing during the time that the events occurred, 1813 and 1814. They are not deep, thoughtful lives, constructed and reconstructed to a perfect literary style. They were written for the moment, hurriedly and sketchily, for popular consumption. Indirectly each one of them was written to teach a lesson--to moralize on the attitudes of the British Navy and the American public. They are not great works, but they are interesting bits of literature. Irving's praise seems a little too profuse, his language a little too flowery, but we must remember the psychology of war hysteria; and he did try to take an objective view of each situation. His particular

talent for writing description is apparent, for especial scenes are vividly and realistically pictured. However, these sketches do not approach in value his longer biographies; his research is trivial; his balance of facts is uneven; and his moralizing is overdone.

These biographies include the lives of Captain James Lawrence, Lieutenant Burrows, Commodore Perry, and Captain David Porter. The first two officers died heroically, and the last two, at the time of writing, were alive and heroes in the eyes of the American people.

Irving starts with the life of Captain Lawrence, well aware of the pitfalls of pure eulogism. His first paragraph states:

> To speak feelingly, yet temperately, of the merits of those who have bravely fought and gloriously fallen in the service of their country, is one of the most difficult tasks of a biographer. Filled with admiration of their valor, and sorrow for their fate, we feel the impotency of our gratitude, in being able to reward such great sacrifices with nothing but empty applause. We are apt, therefore, to be hurried into a degree of eulogism, which however sincere and acknowledged at the time, may be regarded as extravagant by the dispassionate eye of after-years.[1]

He continues with a very sketchy life of the Captain, giving in glowing terms his meritorious conduct as he works his way up the ladder of naval rank. Irving recalls that "the harbor of Tripoli appears to have been the school for our naval heroes."[2] After noting Captain Lawrence's

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[1] Washington Irving, Biographies and Miscellanies, edited by Pierre M. Irving (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Geoffrey Crayon Edition, Vol. XIX, 1866), p. 45.

[2] Ibid., p. 48.

service on several vessels, he arrives at the final and most detailed command, the Chesapeake. Perhaps at that time there was some question as to why Lawrence accepted the challenge of the Shannon. Irving gives the reason, together with all kinds of premonitions and causes for the loss of the battle, and impresses upon the public the intrepidity of the American officer and the honor bestowed upon him by seasoned British officers at his funeral.

> The idea of Lawrence, cut down in the prime of his days, stretched upon his deck, wrapped in the flag of his country,--that flag which he had contributed to ennoble, and had died to defend,--is a picture that will remain treasured up in the dearest recollections of every American. His will form one of those talismanic names which every nation preserves as watchwords of patriotism and valor.[3]

Irving concludes this life by explaining Britain's attitude toward our Navy and the answer we were giving them in this War of 1812.

Lieutenant Burrow's story was short. Not many facts are given about his early life; Irving, however, goes into considerable detail in describing the meeting between the Enterprise and the Boxer. Again he stresses the bravery and modesty of an American officer. The author laments the Lieutenant's death at a youthful age, twenty-nine years, reasons that had he survived he would have been raised to greater importance and usefulness, and concludes that "He had attained the bright object of his wishes, and died in the full fruition of the warrior's hope, with the shouts of victory still sounding in his ears."[4]

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[3] Ibid., p. 66.

[4] Ibid., p. 86.

Commodore Perry is treated much more completely, but before starting his eulogy, Irving takes several paragraphs to lecture on the evils of excessive boasting and of casting derogatory remarks against the British. He maintains that pride in victories is permissible, that sorrow in defeat is natural, that sneering at the enemy, who is, in spite of temporary hostility, to be honored and admired, is out of place and out of keeping with the modesties and feelings of our naval officers who grant them respect and honor and treat them courteously after defeat.

Oliver Perry was brought up in the Navy and was Navy all his life. According to Irving he was too young to have had an opportunity to distinguish himself at Tripoli, yet Irving has just told us that Lieutenant Burrows, born the same year, 1785, had distinguished himself in that same war. After mentioning several of his commands, Irving gets to the crux of the biography--the Battle on Lake Erie. For the first time, the author goes into detail as to the number of ships, guns, and men both sides had. He writes especially that the British had sixty-three guns to our fifty-four. With a good adventurous style he gives a colorful, vivid picture of the encounter between the two factions. He lauds the excessive courage of the Commodore, who left his disabled ship for another and so turned the tide of battle. Evidence of courtesy and care bestowed by Perry on the surrendered enemy is given in detail. Because Irving must have been smarting from some remark that our victories may have been due to luck or numbers, he says:

> In this battle, we trust, incontrovertible proof is given, if such proof is really wanted, that the success of our Navy does not arise from chance, or superiority of force; but from the cool, deliberate

> courage, the intelligent minds and naval skill of our officers, the spirit of our seamen, and the excellent discipline of our ships; from principles, in short, which must insure a frequency of prosperous results, and give permanency to the reputation we have acquired.[5]

He cites Perry's letter announcing the news of victory as simple, modest, and moderate. He wishes that the art of letter writing might be given to the military men, for he is "tired of the valor of the pen, and the victories of the ink-horn."[6]

Irving attempts a bit of prophecy at the end of this biography:

> The peal of war has once more sounded on that lake [Erie], but probably will never sound again. The last war of cannonary that died along her shores was the expiring note of British dominion. Those vast internal seas will, perhaps, never again be the separating space between contending nations; but will be enbosomed within a mighty empire; and this victory, which decided their fate, will stand unrivalled and alone, deriving luster and perpetuity from its singleness.[7]

Captain David Porter, who in his single ship inflicted more injury on the commerce of the British than all the rest of the Navy put together, is the last naval hero of this section. As in the other lives he gives a sketchy life and concentrates on one particular event--a defeat surprisingly. Irving had his reason for this, for he mentions that after the affair of the Argus and Pelican it was said that our sailors were brave only when winning and unhurt, and that any sight of slaughter turned them cowards.

> In this battle between the Phoebe and the Essex it has been proved that they are capable of the highest exercise of courage,--that of standing unmoved among incessant carnage, without being able to return

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[5] Ibid., p. 105.

[6] Ibid., p. 109.

[7] Ibid., p. 111.

a shot, and destitute of a hope of ultimate success.[8]

This unequal battle, a battle for which Irving feels it necessary to apologize for the unchivalrous attack of the British commander, gives Irving a good chance to show his literary ability; it appealed to the romantic, the chivalric in him. The battle was forced upon Porter in neutral waters, not that the Captain was afraid to fight, but was, at that time, unready as he was repairing damages done to his ship by a storm. The men and officers acquitted themselves with supreme courage as the British stood off and coldly and systematically cut them to pieces. When the Captain finally ordered the surrender, out of two hundred fifty-five men, one hundred fifty-four were killed, missing, or severely wounded.

> She [the Essex] was completely cut to pieces, and so covered with the dead and dying, with mangled limbs, with brains and blood, and all the ghastly images of pain and death, that the officer who came on board to take possession of her, though accustomed to scenes of slaughter, was struck with sickening horror, and fainted at the shocking spectacle.[9]

Irving is not above writing occasionally a little sensationalism to whet the interest of his reading public. But in all fairness, the author gives a detailed account of the kindness and care afforded the defeated Americans by Commodore Hillyer. The prisoners were paroled and sent to the United States. When at their arrival off New York the passport given by the British officer was questioned, Porter took back his parole, and next day made his escape to Long Island, thirty miles away. He was accorded a

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[8] Ibid., p. 138.

[9] Ibid., p. 137.

colorful reception in New York City, and, as Irving concludes:

> His last action, also, though it terminated in the loss of his frigate, can scarcely be considered as unfortunate, inasmuch as it has given a brilliancy to his own reputation, and wreathed fresh honors around the name of the American sailor.[10]

The first life in the second part of the minor biographical sketches is that of Thomas Campbell. The set-up of his life in the Geoffrey Crayon edition is peculiar and interesting. It has two sections: the first is the 1815 revision of the original sketch written in 1810; the second is a letter about the poet written by Irving after the death of Campbell in 1844. The biography was published as a preface to an edition of Campbell's poems printed in Philadelphia. Irving introduces the life with the idea that all too often a great writer does not receive well-deserved fame until his death. He concludes that the knowledge of a person tends to lessen the value of his works in the eyes of the public. The living authors of Europe are not so handicapped in America as those in our country because the ocean acts almost as a grave between their lives and their works. He apologizes for the lack of facts in his life sketch of Campbell and states that it actually contains all the information he could collect "concerning a British poet of rare and exquisite endowments."[11]

The life is very sketchy; Irving gives much criticism of the poems of Thomas Campbell, taking especial notice of his "Gertrude of Wyoming". Reference to the poem enables Irving to comment on the fact that few

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[10] Ibid., p. 140.

[11] Ibid., p. 143.

Europeans write of America as it really is. Too often the British press prints derogatory remarks about our country and our writers. He feels that such opposition on their part goes against their reputation and magnanimity. Irving continues to praise "Gertrude" and looks forward to even greater works by this British poet.

Following the completed sketch, Pierre Irving, a nephew of the author, inserted a note saying that after the death of Campbell in 1844, Harper and Brothers were reprinting for America the biography of the poet by Dr. Beattie. They submitted proof sheets to Washington Irving and suggested that a letter by him would be acceptable as an introduction to the American publication.

Irving wrote the letter, telling of his acquaintance with Thomas Campbell, who received his as a friend after the aforesaid sketch was published,"slight and imperfect"[12] as Irving felt it to be. He told how he, Scott, and others were disappointed in Campbell's work, in the inferiority complex that kept him from writing the great poems they felt him capable of doing. Campbell did not favorably impress Irving as a person at that time, but after reading Beattie's biography, Irving took the occasion to recant publicly the erroneous opinion of the poet that he once entertained. He felt that the biography showed "the poet's moral worth to be fully equal to his exalted genius."[13]

The sketch that Irving wrote is of no literary value; it was written

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[12] Ibid., p. 167.

[13] Ibid., p. 173.

as a task, and his heart was not in the work. Yet, the consequent letter is interesting in that it shows the type of man that Irving was, a man famous on both sides of the Atlantic, who was fair enough to apologize publicly for anything he may have said about the poet because he did not care for him personally, not knowing the underlying causes for his actions. The life does not further the literary reputation of Washington Irving, but the letter increases the esteem one has for this New York gentleman.

"Washington Allston" is merely a short account of Irving's friendship with the artist who might have made a great name for himself if he had stayed in England, where he was popular and where he had been unanimously elected to the Royal Academy. After his return to America, Allston apparently did little and achieved no fame of any importance. But Irving recalls him as one of the "purest, noblest, and most intellectual beings that ever honored me with his friendship."[14] The work as a biographical sketch is worthless. We feel that Irving, by writing this at the death of his friend, was trying to assure Allston some fame, at least, in his native country, fame that he had been unable to achieve for himself.

As it has been previously stated, the memoir of Margaret Miller Davidson was written in 1840 at the request of her mother to preface a collection of the daughter's poems. Mrs. Davidson, to help Irving in his task, wrote in great detail incidents, conversations, letters, and a character analysis of her daughter. She also sent copies of poems written at various ages by Margaret to illustrate anecdotes. So complete were the

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[14] Ibid., p. 182.

memoranda that with the exception of the introduction and the conclusion the work is really that of the mother. Naturally, then, the style is extremely eulogistic. The child was precocious, loveable, religious, patient, and thoughtful. We learn that at an early age she contracted the disease that killed her sister. The mother's feelings are anxious and poignant as she watches her idolized daughter slip away from her to die at the age of fifteen. There was a close bond between the invalid mother and the dying child, a bond that is obvious to the reader. So well does the mother know and understand the innermost feelings of her daughter, so well does she express them that Irving has very sensibly and diplomatically edited them as given to him.

He concludes the memoir by saying that it was a mere

> transcript of records furnished by a mother's heart. We shall not pretend to comment on these records; they need no comment, and they need no heightening. Indeed, the farther we have proceeded with our subject, the more has the intellectual beauty and the seraphic purity of the little being we have attempted to commemorate broken upon us, and the more have we shrunk at our own unworthiness of such a task.[15]

"Margaret Davidson" has been included among the short biographies of Irving because it is accredited to him, but, as we have seen, it can hardly be called one of his own creations.

In later years, Irving himself was not especially proud of these literary attempts, so that few are the editions that contain any or all of these short lives. Still they show us characteristics of the man, Irving. His fervent patriotism, intense but temporary, is clearly depicted in his naval biographies. His desire not to hurt the feelings of others, his

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[15] Ibid., p. 359.

inability to give keen strokes of criticism are revealed in "Thomas Campbell". Proof of Washington Irving's sympathy for his fellowmen, his loyalty to friends is his sketch of Washington Allston. That side of Irving that leans toward sentimentality is most noticeable in the brief life of Margaret Davidson, a work very popular in its own day. In short, though these biographical contributions are practically worthless from a literary point of view, they do reveal inner qualities of the author.

## CHAPTER VI

## LIFE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

When Irving was to be baptised in April, 1783, his mother remarked that Washington's work was done and that the child should be named after him. His name, therefore, was a means of an early introduction to the famous man when he entered New York City as the first President of the United States. A young Scotch servant, impressed by the welcome given Washington, determined to present the boy. So, one morning she followed the President into a shop and pointing to the child said, "Please, your honor, here's a bairn was named after you." Lizzie felt that such a claim could not be ignored, and it wasn't, for Washington placed his hand on the child's head and gave him his blessing. Although young Irving was only six years old at the time, he was so much impressed by the incident that he always remembered it.

For years Irving had planned someday to write the biography of the hero of his boyhood. He actually started the work before going to his diplomatic post in Spain, but it was put aside. In the meantime, too, he published two of his biographies, Life of Oliver Goldsmith and Mahomet and His Successors. After his return to America he settled down to research and writing so that in a period of five years, 1855-1859, he published five volumes of his Life of George Washington, which was completed only a few

months before his death. It was a tremendous work begun with intense enthusiasm, but with age and illness weighing him down, it became a burdensome task. Even in the delirium toward the end of his life, he was impressed with the idea that he had a big book to write before he could sleep. Despite the large amount of research, the infirmity of health, and the pressure under which he wrote, especially during the last two volumes, Irving's biography of Washington is considered to be one of the three outstanding lives of Washington written by Americans. Before discussing this biography, however, we shall give a short explanation of several such lives that appeared in the early part of the nineteenth century, before the appearance of Irving's final literary work.

At the death of the greatest man in the nation, naturally many sketches and biographies of his life appeared before the reading public. The first important writer of nineteenth century biography was Mason Locke Weems, better known as Parson Weems. Today he is not rated as an important biographer; in fact, some believe he is not even a biographer. But whatever his position in that field, he has had a great influence on the minds of authors and readers alike, even to the present day.

Parson Weems was an interesting person, a clergyman without a parish, the first and greatest of American book agents. In his "peddling" about the country he grew to know the people, their customs, their interest in reading, and their feelings. Although he wrote four "biographies" altogether--Franklin, Marion, Penn, and Washington--his first and best known was the pamphlet on the life of Washington.

It is, of course, his Washington that interests us at the moment.

Weems knew Washington personally; he had visited at Mount Vernon; and, on the other hand, he understood the American people. Therefore, he wrote a eulogy of Washington, touching the high spots in the man's career without regard for the time element or occasionally for the sequence of events. As he wrote his various editions, he added many of his anecdotes that are entirely fictitious, but intensely interesting and still recounted today. The greatest of these is probably the hatchet-cherry tree episode know to all American children and cited as a lesson in honesty. Although Weems was untruthful in stating his facts, he did not set out to accomplish this for any malicious purpose. His reason for writing this life was to show that honesty and justice are prime virtues of great men. Since Washington was a hero of the American people, his was the life to teach these virtues. Along with his eulogy he presented facts hitherto unknown to the populace. Weems might be considered the forerunner to the fictional biographer or even a late writer of saints' lives.

The next biographer of Washington was John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. His work is highly didactic, extremely political and historical, and his hero, Washington, often gets entirely lost among the chapters. The time element, just as it is in the work of Weems, is completely unbalanced. The book is interesting to those whose field of study is the political parties of early America, but it is not a good biography and has never been particularly popular.

There were two other lives of minor quality to appear about the same time, but the Life and Writings of George Washington (1835) by Jared Sparks was the most popular after that of Weems. It continues on the plan of the

former, being pure eulogy and making Washington a perfect example of the best qualities in man, but it does drop out some of the moral "examples" of these virtues and is somewhat more realistic.

However, it was Washington Irving who wrote the first really good and more impartial biography of Washington. He investigated and used the archives of the State Department and letters extant at that time. He visited Sulgrave Manor in England and the various battle fields in America. He based some of his ideas on Sparks's book, but they were selected ones. He has given the public a well-rounded, human picture of a man who up to that time had been presented as a veritable saint. As a result of his careful research, Irving's Washington is still considered a good source book for information about our first President.

Edward O'Neill, in looking back over the numerous "lives" that have appeared, has chosen three outstanding biographies, three entirely different approaches, as being the best to have been compiled; they are the lives written by Washington Irving, Woodrow Wilson, and Rupert Hughes.[1]

Irving, as we have already noted, spent years in checking his material before attempting his work. He had a set plan and followed it carefully. This was not and could not be a sketch dashed off as was the Life of Oliver Goldsmith. He planned to write a biography and by choosing this man to write about, he had to consider history as well. So carefully planned and so well-balanced is the work that the historical background does not overshadow the biographical. He did not, as did Marshall, lose

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[1] Edward H. O'Neill, History of American Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935), pp. 155-173.

his hero; any historical action regardless of detail or apparent irrelevence can be traced to the influence of Washington whether he appeared or not.

> Though a biography, and of course admitting of familiar anecdote, excursive digression, and a flexible texture of narrative, yet, for the most part it is essentially historic. Washington, had, in fact, very little private life, but was essentially a public character.[2]

The work is truly classified as an historical biography, an outstanding example for the nineteenth century.

Irving divided his work carefully and logically; each is a volume of about five hundred pages. The first volume starts with the history of the Washington family and concludes with his taking command of the Army and with the Battle of Bunker Hill; the second includes the incidents through the capture of Trenton; the third goes as far as the opening of the final campaign in the South; the fourth concludes with his inauguration as President of the United States; and the last volume has in it an appendix with information about the portraits of Washington, his will, and his "Farewell Address".

Irving had among his other reasons for writing his Life of George Washington the desire to correct some of the misconceived notions that the public were entertaining about our first President--ideas that had been given them by the very popular Parson Weems.

The author presents information in great detail and has been impartial in his dealing with what was to the American people an important event in history. Feeling naturally ran high in his day, for people were

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[2] Washington Irving, Life of George Washington (New York: G. P. Putnam and Company, Vols. 5, 1856), p. vi, preface, Vol. I.

still verbally fighting the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Irving in all fairness gives credit where credit is due, and he maintains an honest admiration for a brave and many times chivalrous enemy. When he so vividly tells of the Battle of Yorktown, previous to the capitulation of the enemy, he mentions that Cornwallis had not perceived his danger until it was too late. The British general wrote to Sir Henry Clinton at New York, advised him of his peril, but did not recommend that he [Clinton] send the fleet and army because it was too great a risk to them. Irving concludes with a statement, naming it a "generous abnegation of self on the part of the beleaguered commander."[3] Irving had done much by his other writings to unite the two countries, America and England, and this work certainly did not widen the breach.

His style of writing in this biography, according to S. T. Williams and others, is weaker.[4] Certainly he has not the long descriptive passages that appeared in previous biographies; surely the style is not so leisurely. In his handling of the war years, in particular, he uses a faster moving style which is more effective for the type of topic with which he is dealing. His last volume does drag and appear tame, but we can overlook that to a certain extent when we consider his age and remember the earlier volumes. And, yet, despite his years, he has not lost the touch of presenting graphic pictures. In speaking of the Battle of York-

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[3] Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 349.

[4] Stanley T. Williams, The Life of Washington Irving (New York: Oxford University Press. London: Humphrey Milford, Vols. 2, 1935), p. 205, Vol. II.

town, he says:

> The Charon, a forty-four gun ship, and three large transports, were set on fire by them [the shelling from the French batteries]. The flames ran up the rigging to the tops of the masts. The conflagration, seen in the darkness of the night, with the accompanying flash and thundering of cannon, and bursting of shells; and the tremendous explosions of the ships, all presented a scene of mingled magnificence and horror. [5]

With all the many side topics, the many campaigns that he is explaining, Irving never leaves any loose ends. Each one is brought to its triumphant or tragic conclusion. He does not lose trace of even the minor characters. For instance, in the early part of the Revolutionary War, Knox, who is unknown and insignificant then, goes for some heavy artillery in northern New York; many pages of battles, advances, and retreats are covered, but Irving gets him back with the guns. Not only does he keep track of all his men, but if they no longer fight or have active connections with Washington, he explains in a footnote what eventually happens, as he did with that soldier of fortune, General Conway.

His historical treatment is especially well done. Among the events that stand out are those of Braddock's Defeat, the Battle of Bunker Hill, the battles with Burgoyne in New York, and finally the treachery of Benedict Arnold.

Irving is by far much stronger in his character development than in any other element. Obviously the most complete sketch is that of George Washington. His treatment is somewhat eulogistic, but the laudation is concentrated at the end of the biography. Rarely does Irving put in his

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[5] Washington Irving, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 345.

own reaction to any event. He has actually done as he said in his last volume:

> We have avoided rhetorical amplification and embellishments, and all gratuitous assumptions, and have sought, by simple and truthful details to give his Washington's character an opportunity for developing itself, and of manifesting those fixed principles and that noble consistency which reigned alike throughout his civil and military career.[6]

Only in the last two pages does Irving say anything of the greatness of Washington, and then he concludes the life with a quoted eulogy from another source, the British statesman, Lord Brougham.

One of the few examples of personal feeling on the part of the author appears when he uses a characteristic of Washington as a lesson to public officials:

> The schedule of his public account furnishes not the least among the many noble and impressive lessons, taught by his character and example. It stands a touchstone of honesty in office, and a lasting rebuke on that lavish expenditure of the public money, too often heedlessly, if not wilfully, indulged by military commanders.[7]

And it is not only characteristics of the General, but of other people that he cites as moral lessons. When General Schuyler was being criticized so unfavorably by so many factions, they used his "politeness" to prisoners as an example of incompetence on his part. Irving inserts the following remark:

> If his courtesy was imposed upon, it only proved that, incapable of doubledealing himself, he suspected it not in others. All generous natures are liable to imposition; their warm impulses being too quick

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[6] Ibid., Vol, V, p. 301.

[7] Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 409.

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for selfish caution. It is the cold, the calculating, and the mean, whose distrustful wariness is never taken in.[8]

Just as in all of his previous writings, he has no good to say of anyone who is hectoring or causing trouble for his heroes. In this biography he dislikes the actions of Philip Freneau, who was secretary to Thomas Jefferson as well as editor of a paper which continually berated the government officials. With a sharp word for Freneau and an indirect hit at Jefferson, Irving writes:

> It appears to us rather an ungracious determination on the part of Jefferson, to keep the barking cur in his employ, when he found him [Freneau] annoying to the chief, whom he professed, and we believe with sincerity to revere. Neither are his reasons for so doing satisfactory, savoring as they do, of those strong political suspicions already noticed.[9]

Irving also gets disgusted with the open jealousy over promotions, as well as with the bickering among the sectional militia. Many a battle was lost; many a good leader left the army because of these vices. But Irving reaches the height of a fiction writer's art when he deals with Benedict Arnold. He anticipates the betrayal when he writes of Arnold at the walls of Quebec, where with only five hundred men capable of fighting, he refused to leave the site.

> Happy for him had he fallen at that moment.--Happy for him had he found a soldier's and a patriot's grave, beneath the rock-built wall of Quebec. Those walls would have remained enduring monuments of his renown. His name, like that of Montgomery, would have been treasured up among the dearest though most mournful recollections of his country,

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[8] Ibid., Vol. II, pp. 98-99.

[9] Ibid., Vol. V, p. 154.

> and that country would have been spared the single traitorous blot that dims the bright page of its revolutionary history.[10]

The meeting between Major Andre and Arnold, tha capture of Andre, and the subsequent execution were especially well-handled. His sympathetic treatment was not overdone; the justice of the verdict, the reluctance of the American officials to see him die are interesting items. The excited and exciting preparations that Arnold made, and his escape just as Washington and his aides were arriving follow the tenets of romantic fiction--but they were true. In referring to Arnold's flight, the author says:

> In the meantime, Arnold, panic-stricken, had sped his caitiff flight through the Highlands; infamy howling in his rear; arrest threatening him in the advance; a fugitive past the post which he had recently commanded; shrinking at the sight of that flag which hitherto it had been his glory to defend! Alas! how changed from Arnold, who, but two years previously, when repulsed, wounded, and crippled, before the walls of Quebec, could write proudly from a shattered camp, " I am in the way of my duty, and I have no fear!"[11]

We also get in this biography the little human touches of his characters to show us that in spite of their greatness they are men and women like other men and women in the Americas. In the midst of the war and worries, Washington was conserned about Mrs. Washington, who had never been inoculated for smallpox, and he "was relieved, therefore, by her submitting to inoculation during their sojourn in Philadelphia, and having a very favorable time."[12]

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[10] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 151.

[11] Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 123.

[12] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 211.

John Marshall's Washington was a mere puppet, an inhuman being who would not have bothered with this homey touch. Or perhaps we could better say that Marshall would never have bothered with such a trivial comment.

One of the incidents interesting to us today is the famous Paul Revere's ride. No one can forget or can be unimpressed by the significance of this celebrated ride, to which Irving also refers. However, he tosses the incident aside with a mere: "Dr. Warren sent off two messengers by different routes to give the alarm that the King's troops were actually sallying forth."[13] So does time change points of view. We recall that incident, but how many remember that Montgomery who fell at Quebec, a man that Irving said would live in the minds and hearts of all Americans forever!

Together with the military detail, the statistical exactness, Irving inserts humor. It is not always his own humor, but that of the men themselves. On one occasion when the men were storming Stony Point in a vital battle, "Mad Anthony" Wayne explained the situation, adding, "Not a dog barked to give the alarm--all the dogs in the neighborhood had been privately destroyed beforehand."[14] The distributing of shares of land in the Ohio Valley to the white men gave the author a chance to exhibit his own brand of humor. An old Delaware sachem, meeting Mr. Gest surveying for the Ohio Company

propounded a somewhat puzzling question. "The French," said he, "claim

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[13] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 391.

[14] Ibid., Vol. III, p. 467.

> all the land on one side of the Ohio, the English claim all the land on the other side--now where does the Indians' land lie?"
>
> Poor savages! Between their "fathers", the French, and their "brothers", the English, they were in a fast way of being most lovingly shared out of the whole country.[15]

This Life of George Washington was the most ambitious attempt that Irving made in the literary field, and it was the work of his old age. Many people consider the work exhausting and tame and feel that it is not the type of topic suitable to the particular genius of Washington Irving. He lost in this work the charm and felicity of style that are so characteristic of his earlier writings. We agree that it has not the leisurely style of previous works, but for this historical biography a faster moving style is to be preferred. We agree that it is old-fashioned and conventional and somewhat partisan, but it is more than that. As far as possible, Irving has kept a straight account of Washington's life with a few needed deviations. The work is essentially, basically true, and the one requirement of modern biography is truth. Since 1855-1859 much more information has been found about Washington, but what Irving has compiled cannot be ignored.

Irving has been as impartial as possible in his treatment of the War, world problems, and politics. He has calmly and sincerely drawn his picture of George Washington, and albeit with an exalted tone, yet with a human touch. For the period in which he wrote, Irving did an excellent piece of work, and as a result, was widely read.

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[15] Ibid., Vol. I, p. 57.

We must remember the demands of the biography reading public of the nineteenth century, who "wanted the traditional aspects of the great figures of the world told in genteel language",[16] when we judge this outstanding accomplishment. Too, we must remember that it is rated by some modern critics as one of the three best biographies of Washington and still a good source book.

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[16] Edward H. O'Neill, History of American Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935), p. 166.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSIONS

Although after a century Washington Irving is remembered for scattered tales from The Knickerbocker History and the Alhambra, he is generally unknown to the American people as a biographer. In this day when biography is demanded by the reading public, it is rather astonishing to find so few who have ever read even one of his three best biographies, those of Columbus, Goldsmith, and Washington. It is a known fact that in times of stress and crisis people turn for help in solving their own problems to biographies of men who have previously met the same situations. However, the public turns primarily to modern biographers who, in some contrast to Irving, have a more scholarly and scientific approach, a more objective and impartial treatment, and a more complete picture of the whole. One feels in reading lives written by such biographers that one can accept what is written and gain much from the work. But Irving's reputation does not derive from his ability as a realistic biographer, and consequently the modern reader fails to turn to his biographies for help in their own problems. Yet, to judge Irving by modern standards is not entirely fair, for in his own age the publication of each of his biographical works was eagerly accepted by an enthusiastic public; each new life was lauded by

such well-known contemporaries as Prescott[1], Bryant[2], and Ellery Channing[3]. And we in our own day can gain from Irving, the biographer, an understanding of his age, of the man Irving, as well as of the men he dealt with however unobjectively. In reading him, we may judge his relationship to contemporary biography; we may learn to what extent he told his age the truth about his fellowmen. We may consider the quality of his scholarship and of his style, the method of his character development, the nature of his settings. In short,today's critic may learn much in the appraisal of yesterday's successful author.

Although the nineteenth century public required of biography a less realistic appraisal of their subject than we do now, they still wanted the truth. Irving, in spite of his several faults, held strictly to the truth as far as he went. Unlike Parson Weems, who deliberately invented anecdotes to serve as morals and lessons of virtue, he introduced instead with the skill of the fiction writer incidents that he could prove were true. If he did not go far enough in creating a full, realistic picture, if he gave us sketches rather than the more complete portraits which we expect today, we must credit it to the undeveloped scholarship of America a century ago.

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[1] Stanley T. Williams, The Life of Washington Irving (New York: Oxford University Press. London: Humphrey Milford, Vols. 2, 1935), pp. 204, 238, 333, Vol, II.

[2] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 297.

[3] Ibid., Vol. II, p. 223.

Was Irving the scholar that he enjoyed thinking he was? Stanley T. Willaims, the acknowledged standard authority on Irving, treats contemptuously the two years of work that Irving devoted to his life of Columbus. Yet, though he used much material compiled over a period of thirty years by the Spanish historian, Navarrete, those two years were packed with scholarly research and yielded three new sources of information. One might remind Mr. Willaims that a prime factor of scholarship is the ability to search out and make creative use of pertinent source material. Again, Mr. Williams, taking the modern point of view, feels that Irving committed a serious misdemeanor by failing to acknowledge more fully his considerable debt to Navarrete. One must remember that token acknowledgments such as Irving made in his Columbus preface were the custom years ago, and that the Spaniard himself, as we may gather from the introduction to his third work, felt that the "erudite" Irving had done scholarship a signal favor by his use of the material. Then too, Irving has included in his biographies of Columbus and Washington many maps, charts, and sketches to give visual aid to the more scholarly reader in picturing the marches, voyages, and battles of the historical biographies. Yet Irving's scholarship is not selective enough to be wholly erudite. He has taken unnecessary notes, some of interest, others not, and both types are inflicted on his readers in the copious appendices to his volumes. For his day Irving, no doubt, was considered scholarly. Perhaps today's critic, judging that his scholarship is not selective, would hesitate to accord him the honor.

Perhaps one of the strongest considerations in defense of Irving's

ability as a biographer is the fluent and effective style of writing for which he became famous in his fiction.[4] There is the same balanced, leisurely flow of words that one associates with Irving, the narrator. His vocabulary is superlative; his Flaubertine ability to choose the apt word is obvious. Vividly and realistically Irving describes his settings, using the minute detail he made popular in "Rip Van Winkle". Also the subtle humor for which the public looked in his tales characterizes the biographical studies, notably that of Goldsmith, the least historical, perhaps the most literary of them all. On the other hand, too rarely is the serenity of style broken by the splashes of irony that added zest to the historical biographies. Too cautiously he uses the condiment of stark realism as occasional sauce for such weighty works as the biography of Columbus. He tells his readers that he feels one should not give too graphic an account of the tortures of the Indians. Objectivity in Irving is rare. The idealistic charm that colors his style becomes at times a little cloying.

In delineating his biographical characters, Irving makes certain characteristic gestures. The men he recreates are neither portraits nor caricatures. Their classification lies at a point between. More thoroughness, greater realism, a higher degree of objectivity must have made his people more understandable to us today. Irving's eulogistic treatment of his main characters results in a partial eclipse of their total natures;

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From the periodicals listed in the Bibliography some information about Irving's style in fiction and Irving's personal character was obtained, but there was no material pertinent to Irving as a biographer. Consequently footnotes from these sources have not been necessary.

his good men are very, very good; his bad men, completely horrid. Empathetically projecting his own personality into those of Columbus, Goldsmith, Washington, he idealizes them, as an optimistic man is likely to idealize himself, and conversely crucifies those enemies of his heroes as if for personal affronts against himself. More objectively developed, actually, are his thumbnail sketches, those characters of whom one might expect less thorough treatment. Minor characters in book-length biographies are, on the whole, more objectively drawn than his main characters. So much for the subjective variants in the author's character development; the constant factor, his sympathy for mankind, overshadows the variants. In his consideration of the characters of Major Andre and Balboa, indeed of all of the heroic characters he has chosen, Irving shows his telling sympathy and thus reveals the actual touchstone of the biographer.

Irving's settings are almost as important in his biographies as in his tales. Columbus teems with romantic, picturesque Edens of the New World. Effusive praise for the beauty and serenity of the native valleys contrasts with his extreme horror at the devastation of these same sites by the avaricious Spaniards. Time and place in the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus and again in the Companions do not appreciably influence the character development. Apparently Irving was of the school that believes heroes develop because their inherent qualities are superior to those of other men, and that incidents of time and place are not primarily responsible for their heroism. In George Washington Irving makes of background an extremely important factor and one graphically portrayed. Naturally terrain is vital to any battle, to the setting of Braddock's

defeat, to Bunker Hill, to Trenton. The opportune use of geographical advantages and the overcoming of the disadvantages give the reader a chance to measure the qualities of his military leaders. In Mahomet, however, the reader finds setting of scanty importance, for here is the character of a man who is influenced more by heaven and thoughts of immortality than by earth and time. In Goldsmith setting has its greatest influence on the main character who moves and develops against a background of literary men, judging his associates and responding to their judgment. In picturing locales, Irving has the same masterly touch of minute and realistic portrayal handled in a romantic manner as in his works of fiction.

In his own century Washington Irving's books were eagerly awaited by readers on both continents. Reading him amounted to a fad with the English. Even his very sentimental "Margaret Davidson" was sobbed over with pleasure by the forbears of that unique being of our own day, the American cynic. Historians, critics, poets, all praised his work excepting only James Fenimore Cooper, who hated him and bestowed upon him the title, "Mr. Easily Pleased". Today Irving is not often read; his fame must rest primarily on the fact that he was our first internationally accepted writer. Yet his biographies, with all their weaknesses and virtues, have their place in the development of American biography which, year by year, gains stature in our national life. Their actual worth marks Irving as America's first important biographer.

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An Abstract of the Thesis

WASHINGTON IRVING AS A BIOGRAPHER

by

Ethel Crockett Oliver

(A. B., Bates College, 1935)

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requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

1948

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS, WASHINGTON IRVING AS A BIOGRAPHER

On the library shelves of English-speaking people for over one hundred years have appeared the tales of Washington Irving, America's popular story-teller of the nineteenth century. Whether or not his less-known biographies are also deserving of such attention is a question to be answered only by reading them and evaluating them in the light of their intrinsic worth, in terms of the requirements of Irving's day and of ours. Are his book-length biographies truthful works? Do they present clear portraits objectively done, of both major and minor characters? What of his briefer sketches, his essays written for monthly publication in Irving's Analectic Magazine, how do they compare with his longer biographies? Was Irving, the romantic teller of popular tales sufficiently a scholar to be successful in such undertakings? What of his source materials? What of his reputation among scholars? Did Irving adapt in his biographies his popular ability to paint vivid backgrounds in the tales told? Is his style of biographical writing such that literature would be impoverished by its loss? In short, how can the reader of our day profit from knowing Washington Irving as a biographer?

I have formed my conclusions after a critical reading of all of Irving's biographical writing. Critics of our day, as well as those contemporary to Irving, I read and compared. Such of their conclusions

that seemed pertinent I have included in various forms in this thesis. I made a careful study of the acknowledged authority on Irving, Stanley T. Williams. The modern biography of Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, by Samuel E. Morison, has been considered in contrast to The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus by Irving. I also read as background material of American biography Dana K. Merrill's The Development of American Biography, and Edward H. O'Neill's History of American Biography, 1800-1935.

From this critical study I have concluded that Irving is an apt biographer, but in terms of today's requirements, not a superlative one. I feel that readers of his day were justified in their keen appreciation of his historical biographies, his literary biography, his biographical sketches, since those works satisfied the popular taste of his day in supplying a subjectivized account, written in a charming manner and with a vocabulary of unusual aptitude, of men and women worthy of interest. Heroes of exploratory history, like Columbus, of religion, like Mahomet, of military fame, like Washington, suffered from no competition with the clear-cut figures of today's literature of even of today's cinema. To the nineteenth century Irving's characters must have seemed familiarly real, coming as they did after Parson Weems, whose occasional falsehoods about his characters served to point a moral.

Yet morals there were, too, in satisfying measure, in the personal comments Irving inserted in his charming way throughout his works, his scorn of treachery, as in the incident of the faithless captain who attemp-

ted to claim honor due Columbus and was rewarded by dishonor to himself; his distaste at recounting such horrifying facts as the Spanish tortures of Indians in the same book; his pride in Washington's thoughtfulness toward his wife during the smallpox epidemic in Philadelphia; his comments on the gentlemanly refinement of General Schuyler and his kindly treatment of the enemy during the Revolutionary War; his ardent hatred of slave-trading during Columbus's day, and his admiration of Washington's fair treatment of his slaves; his keen pleasure in recounting the amusing evidences of Goldsmith's generosity, as when that sympathetic individual relayed a much-needed loan to himself for the sake of an impoverished landlady and her children.

The readers of his own day read eulogies of Irving's scholarship by other writers they admired such as Bryant and Prescott, and benefited from Irving's research in Spain of an age so different from their own. They may have perused his maps and sketches with an interest greater than our own, having had the benefit of so little else in their schooling and reading to clarify thus the Columbian expeditions, the Revolutionary battles.

Leisurely readers of an age so much more leisurely than our own must have thoroughly enjoyed the unjournalistic manner of Irving's style, his minute, pictorial detail, his easy flow of effective words. Unschooled in the ultra-realism, the frequently shocking frankness of our own day, Irving's contemporaries may have enjoyed more than we the idealized version of his heroes, must have appreciated the justification or total

ignoring of their foibles and vices. Judging from his exceeding popularity, Irving's sympathy toward the characters whose lives he relates must have found a welcome home in the natures of his contemporaries. Unsophisticated men in a world so much larger than ours apparently found escape in the well-drawn backgrounds against which his men moved, perhaps gained latitude from their acquaintance with the Spanish court, with the battlefields of Arabia, perhaps gained sophistication from the literary setting of Goldsmith's life and times. Small wonder then, that Washington Irving was the author of best-sellers in his day and still is familiar to you and me.

To what extent do we consider Irving an apt biographer? Insofar as Irving deals with truth he pleases the modern reader of biography who has learned to insist on a truthful account as a prerequisite of biographical writing. We, as they did, appreciate a philosophical approach to any writing, feel, rather opportunistically perhaps in this day of individual betterment, that we are thus broadening our own moral stature in agreeing with a good man's judgments.

Irving's superb vocabulary is perhaps the more satisfying to today's reader, sated as we are with the child-like simplicity of the Lardners and the Saroyans. Sympathetic treatment we appreciate fully, used to a more cynical regard of our fellowmen than were our forbears of the last century. And are we so sophisticated, so worldly now that the picture of a Moorish battle fails to register with us, or the image of three tiny ships moving ever toward the terrifying unknown--now our familiar world--fails to thrill us, or the vivid surroundings of men who struck

the flint of history cause us boredom? If we today, then, still honor Irving's work on these counts, why should we judge him a biographer merely apt, rather than superlative?

We have referred before to the insistence of the modern reader of biography on a wholly truthful account. If our hero has weaknesses, why so have we, and we feel the closer to him because of them, gain strength to meet our own problems by witnessing the manner of his struggle against his odds and the outcome of that struggle. Literacy is more wide-spread now than formerly. Book publications have increased tremendously. Any biographer today, therefore, seeing his subject only in part, omitting details that would make of his picture a whole portrait, is often liable to a storm of protest from scholars as well-versed in the subject as himself. Irving, of course, failed to paint a whole picture; and inferences are not enough for a fact-minded and sophisticated world.

To consider the quality of literary moralizing from the present day point of view is usually to beg the question. What loosely amounts to philosophy in one mind may seem in another the accepted tenets of experience. Most men of our day, however, would accept in Irving's work the author comment which reveals certain moral concepts, would feel that it is not too prevalent to be distasteful. Yet the present-day reader seems to support more willingly the author whose moral concepts emerge from the action that he delineates rather than one who inserts his own ideas into material dealing primarily with another man.

In our appraisal of Irving as a biographer not truly great, we today

may agree that he lacked real scholarship. His own research for his biographies does not compare favorably in thoroughness or in the selection of only pertinent material with masters of research in our own day. The maps and charts in Irving's historical biographies hold no great lure for the reader fresh from the profusely illustrated historical editions of today.

In the contemporary "masterpiece" wit and irony frequently point up the beauty of apt expression. Although we accord Irving the honor due him for the perfection of his style, we miss in him the frequent pungency of today's contrasts in temper.

Fresh from vivid character portrayals on the stage and screen, we today find rather unknowable the idealized man of whom Irving writes. In such characters we consider the lack of realism disappointing. We cannot judge an author of superlative merit who, while he treats his characters sympathetically, lacks the power first to see them objectively and wholly, then to clarify their representative traits with the light of compassion.

Perhaps Irving best achieves merit from our standpoint in his effective use of setting. In fact, the backgrounds of today's most successful books seem not unlike those of Irving. Picturesque detail, realistically treated, provides a fluent frame for those lives he painted.

Conclusively, we feel that Irving deserves a place in our lives and our libraries, less because of the excellence of his biographical ability than for his undeniable place in the development of American biography.

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